都市シリーズ

騒楽都市 OSAKA〈上〉

著●川上 稔

電撃文庫

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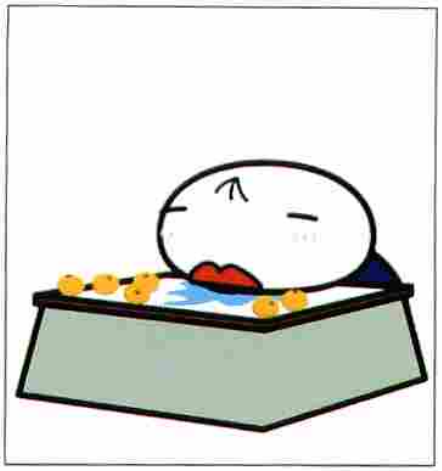
都市（とし）シリーズ

蠱楽都市OSAKA（そうがくとしおおさか）〈上〉

水底に沈んだ一組の男女の亡骸。それは、日本全国を巻き込み、東西分裂のきっかけとなった近畿動乱のひとつの答えだった…。それから13年。東西に分かれながらも微妙な均衡の上に保たれた平和が再び崩れようとしていた。大阪圏で新たな最強神器を作るために言詞加速器IXOLDE（イゾルデ）が開発されたのだ。IXOLDEの起動を阻止すべく、矛盾都市（ゼノンシティ）-TOKYOから東京圏総長の中村秀久らが中立を保つ名護屋圏へ侵攻。詞変線（オルタードライン）を越え、大阪圏に潜入した。

大阪圏はなぜ失われた最強神器を再生させるのか？　それぞれがそれぞれの答えを求め、今、大阪を舞台に東西の新たな覇権戦争が始まる！

川上稔が贈る都市シリーズ第4弾！



川上　稔（かわかみ　みのる）

1975年1月3日生まれの東京出身。『蠢楽都市OSAKA』のゲーム化に際しては、企画、シナリオ、総監督を務め、パワー全開。事故で車は大破したが、本人は無傷。愛車を乗り捨て、都市シリーズ第5弾、第6弾へと驀進中。

【電撃文庫作品】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス1935

エアリアルシティ

風水街都 香港〈上〉〈下〉

蠢楽都市OSAKA〈上〉

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

山形県生まれの栃木育ち。テンキー所属。『蠢楽都市OSAKA』ではゲーム版のキャラデザインも担当。趣味は散歩と強制土日出勤。今回の挿画では乳まで徹夜で描かされ、前回を通じて人体を極めるとともに更に人生について深く…（以下略）。

カバー／旭印刷

都市シリーズ

蒼楽都市（ソウガクトシ）

OSAKA

〈上〉

著●川上 稔

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・ごあいさつ

　このたびは都市シリーズ「蠢楽都市－ＲＨＹＴＨＭ・上」をお買いあげいただきまして誠に有り難う御座います。
ＲＥＡＤされる前に本口絵の解説をお読みいただきますと、より一層楽しく時間を過ごせます。正しい使用法でご愛用下さい。なお、この口絵部分は再発行いたしませんというか物理的に無理なので大切に保管して下さい。

Presented by
Minoru Kawakami

The 4th city

From 1996・CITY
To　 1998・CITY

Its Formatted by NOVEL-words

カバー・口絵デザイン：ＴＥＮＫＹ
カバー・口絵イラスト：さとやす（ＴＥＮＫＹ）
カバー・口絵ＣＧ：佐藤真理子・松下佳靖（ＴＥＮＫＹ）

蠢楽都市 OSAK

陽阪・勝意（ＨＩＺＡＫＡ・ＳＨＯ－Ｉ）
字名：己の詞を持たない少年（Ｄｉｓｗｏｒｄｅｒ）
肩書：なし
戦種：近接格闘師（Ｃｒｉｔｉｃａｌ　Ｆｏｒｃｅｒ）
神器：なし
舞闘：南大門無手派

陽阪勝意
HIZAKA·SHO-I

直線突撃
➡・➡＋Ｐ

旋回肘撃
⬇・↘・➡＋Ｐ

直連撃
Ｐ連打

対架空撃
➡・⬇・↘＋Ｐ

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Character 1

Hizaka Shoui

Urban Name: Dis-Worder

Title: None

Combat Style: Critical Forcer

Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: Nandaimon Unarmed Style

Straight Line Charge

→ →+P

Rotating Elbow Strike

↓ ↘ →+P

Direct Barrage

Rapidly Tap P

Anti-Aerial Strike

→ ↓ ↘+P

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

結城・夕樹（YU-KI・YU-KI）
字名：殺括者（Killing Holder）
肩書：古都圏総長・古都圏守護役
戦種：遠隔神術師（Energy Gunner）
神器：水神・凍神
舞闘：南大門神術派

結城夕樹
YU-KI・YU-KI

右凍竜
←タメ・→＋P

左水竜
↓タメ・↑＋K

朱雀・流体給弾
←・→・↘・↓・↑＋P

鳳星・操神祈弾
ガード中・→＋PK

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Character 2

Yuuki Yuuki

Urban Name: Killing Holder

Title: Koto Chancellor – Koto Guardian

Combat Style: Energy Gunner

Rhythm: Aqua High – Cold High

Dance Combat: Nandaimon Holy Spell Style

Over Cold High

Hold ← →+P

Wind Aqua High

Hold↓ ↑+K

Suzaku – Load Ether

← → ↘ ↓ ↑+P

Housei – God-Controlling Prayer Blast

While Guarding →+PK

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

難波・総一郎（NANBA・SOUITIROU）
字名：鬼沈め（Ogre Buster）
肩書：大阪圏総長
戦種：近接武術師（Strike Forcer）
神器：草薙
舞闘：紫電流改

難波総一郎
NANBA・SOUITIROU

平安型裂波
⬋タメ・➡+P

移相型裂濤
⬋タメ・⬈+K

移相型断伐
⬇タメ・⬆+PK

草薙・強化嶽刈り
➡・⬅・⬋・⬇・⬊・➡+P

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Character 3

Nanba Souichirou

Urban Name: Ogre Buster

Title: Osaka Chancellor

Combat Style: Strike Forcer

Rhythm: Kusanagi

Dance Combat: Modified Purple Electricity Style

Flat Tearing Wave

Hold ↙ →+P

Phase Shifting Tearing Surge

Hold↓ ↗+K

Phase Shifting Slice

Hold ↓ ↑+PK

Kusanagi – Strengthened Mountain Peak Trimmer

→ ← ↙ ↓ ↘ →+P

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

山下・妙子（YAMASITA・TAEKO）
字名：竜后（Drachen Konigin）
肩書：名護屋圏総長
戦種：全方位義体師（Steel Master）
神器：雷神
舞闘：我流

山下妙子
YAMASITA・TAEKO

T・STRIKE
P・P

T・RAVE
P・K・K・P

T・CHARGE
PKタメ（三段階）

7thHEAVEN
T・STRIKE中・↓・↑+PK

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Character 4

Yamashita Taeko

Urban Name: Drachen Königin

Title: Nagoya Chancellor

Combat Style: Steel Master

Rhythm: Thunder High

Dance Combat: Personal Style

T Strike

P P

T Rave

P K K P

T Charge

Hold PK (Three Stages)

7th Heaven

During T Strike ↓ ↑+PK

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

CHARACTER

音楽都市 OSAKA

中村・久秀（NAKAMURA・HISAHIDE）
字名：奏音の領主（Harmonist）
肩書：東京圏総長
戦種：近接格闘師（Critical Forcer）
神器：なし
舞闘：伊庭式

中村久秀
NAKAMURA・HISAHIDE

ヒール・ドロウ
→・→+K

クイック・タップ
↓・↘・→+K

レイビング・ダンス
K連打

ブギーポップ
→・↓・↘+K

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Character 5

Nakamura Hisahide

Urban Name: Harmonist

Title: Tokyo Chancellor

Combat Style: Critical Forcer

Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: Iba Style

Heel Draw

→ →+K

Quick Tap

↓ ↘ →+K

Raving Dance

Rapidly Tap K

Boogie Pop

→ ↓ ↘+P

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

高田・清犠（TAKADA・SEIGI）
字名：速読歴（Fast Reader）
肩書：なし
戦種：狗神使い（Beast Master）
神器：なし
舞闘：なし

高田清犠
TAKADA・SEIGI

意志なる読了
ガード中・↓・↘・→+P

意志なる予言
投げ間合いで←・↙・↓・↘・→+P

太郎丸・疾走
↓・↘・→+K

太郎丸・猫目猫
ガード中・←・↙・↓・↘・→+K

コマンドはキャラが右向きの場合です。

Character 6

Takada Seigi

Urban Name: Fast Reader

Title: None

Combat Style: Beast Master

Rhythm: None

Dance Combat: None

Will Reading

While Guarding ↓ ↘ →+P

Will Prophecy

While at Throwing Distance ← ↙ ↓ ↘ →+P

Taromaru – Rush

↓ ↘ →+K

Taromaru – Cat's Eye Hunter

While Guarding ← ↙ ↓ ↘ →+K

Commands are based on a right-facing character.

ワンポイント！対戦画面

・手段を選ぶな。
・漢は黙ってワンコイン。
・ゲームは1日1時間。

・ここの画像は全て冗談なので
信じないよーに。

Battle Screen

One Point! Battle Screen

–Use any means necessary.

–A true man shuts up and wins on a single coin.

–One hour of video games a day.

–This screenshot is entirely a joke, so don’t actually believe it.

Prologue: First of All (Instructions) — (12/16/1996)

No talent

Strength or material

Is contained to man

Not even one

(From Miyazawa Kenji's *Spring and the Demon*)

Part 1

9:51 PM

A torrent of water surged through the night.

It was a waterfall.

That rumbling with actual mass shook one's body and had a seemingly tangible power to it.

The night was dampened by the mist produced by the waterfall.

Someone walked through that damp night.

A single presence climbed the mountain path dampened by the night and the mist.

It was a girl.

The strong-willed girl was in her mid-teens.

She wore a dry suit for diving, but it was a little big for her and she had a belt wrapped around the waist to keep it from falling down.

A diving mask hung from her neck like a necklace and each step produced a light plastic sound as it hit the collar of the dry suit.

That dry sound was contrasted by the wet footsteps of her mountain-climbing shoes.

"…"

She silently climbed that mountain path that was filled with the night and the mist.

The waterproof maglite in her right hand was off.

Her pace remained steady even when she stepped on branches or leaves.

She was used to walking here.

With each footstep, the rumble of the waterfall grew louder and the ratio of night to mist changed.

The mist grew thicker and the night began to lose its darkness.

The waterfall was nearby, so the girl walked to make its roar even louder.

She stopped treading on branches and leaves and her footsteps gained the distinctive note of rock.

The heavy atmosphere of the surrounding trees thinned.

The waterfall's roar grew even louder as it echoed off the rock.

The girl briefly stopped and took a breath.

“I wonder if he’ll get mad at me afterwards. I didn’t tell him I repaired this at home…”

The girl touched the chest of her dry suit.

The words “Tochigi Yakushi Firefighters” were written in white, acrylic letters.

The family name Fujiwara was written below.

The shoulder contained a station name and member number.

The dry suit belonged to the rescue team in charge of Tochigi Prefecture’s Mt. Yakushi.

“…”

She started walking again and the waterfall grew even louder.

Her pace had picked up.

She was in the mountains in December, but she had sweat on her brow. That was just how well-insulated the dry suit was.

But despite the sweat, she rushed through the darkness.

She was close to her destination.

She walked across the stones.

Suddenly, her vision was surrounded by a hazy but bright white mist.

She had entered an open space.

The mist was white even at night because of a bright light far overhead.

She stopped and looked back to see the shape of the forest in the dark mist.

She took a breath and turned her back on that forest.

There was only mist up ahead as well.

She used a technien she had only just learned in middle school.

—Fujiwara – Sight Tech – Take – Secure Vision – Hit.

As she muttered those words in her heart, strength filled her gaze.

She had used a Tech.

Techs were specialized physical or mental techniques one learned at school or elsewhere. Modern cybernetic and organic technology allowed people to use them with a single command.

Her conditioned reflex training used a certain Tempo as the keyword that activated this bodily skill. With the word “take”, light reached her vision.

She could somewhat see through the mist now.

She looked back and found she could see the damp shapes of the trees in what had only looked like dark mist before.

She looked forward and saw the pure emptiness of the night instead of mist.

The power of her Tech did not allow her to see through some of the darkness and she could hear the great rumbling of water coming from beyond that darkness.

It was the roar of a great waterfall in Nikko's Mt. Yakushi.

That was the surging voice of Kegon Falls.

As one of the most well-known waterfalls in Japan, it made its presence known with a great torrent of water even at night and even when out of view.

"…"

She shuddered.

—Fujiwara – Mind Tech – Take – Restrain Urge – Miss.

Her legs trembled and she pursed her lips while looking up.

Even with her Sight Tech, a thick layer of mist hid the sky, but she could still see the artificial light that illuminated the mist from above.

A rectangular terrace-like platform jutted out twenty meters up the giant stone wall to her right.

It was the viewing platform for the waterfall.

There was no one on that platform, so only the sunlamp on its edge looked down at her.

Looking at that artificial light stopped her trembling.

She faced forward again and saw the end of the mountain path.

She left that path that only the few locals knew of and found herself halfway up the rock walls surrounding Kegon Falls.

She descended the rocks which had no path to follow.

Soon, the downward slope vanished and she stood on a simple rocky area. A collection of pointed rocks and stones formed the ground.

She could now hear a flowing river mixed in with the roar of the falls.

The wind had also started to blow.

She brushed back her bangs which were wet from the mist.

When she touched her cheek, she found her face wet as if from tears.

…I didn't want to start playing it yet, but I guess I'll do this like always.

With that silent comment, she pulled a single cord from the dry suit's waist pocket.

The cord had headphones attached.

The speakers were larger than normal because it was waterproofed.

She stuck them in her ears and switched them on.

A gentle and refreshing Irish sound started playing.

It was instrumental music with a Live contained inside.

The music's Message was that of water and she let the water music flow through her.

The Live in the music washed over the flowing Lives making up her body.

She raised the volume to increase the Octave.

She used an Octave of 80,000. Among normal people, that took some talent.

Finally, she sang her Words to fully place herself in the music.

Song that flows like water

She who flows through time

People do not stop

Time does not stop

Simply flow like water

And inherit all of the questions

As she sang, she squeezed the maglite in her right hand.

"Aqua Middle Rhythm."

With that clear voice, the mist around her right hand began to move.

—Fujiwara – Aqua Middle/Mind Tech – Multiple Take – Water Control – Hit.

As the music known as a Rhythm sent the water Live into her body, that Live became her power.

By listening to the water Live just like activating a Tech, she could control the water.

The boys in her class were always arguing over what combination of power and commercial Device they could use to fight. Needless to say, she was not interested in such uncivilized things.

The girl only used her Rhythm when she wanted to control water.

This was one such time.

“Open the way.”

The mist parted before her eyes and her vision cleared.

The environmental change allowed the wind that lacked mist to strike her cheeks.

Her Rhythm’s power parted the mist and her Tech’s power let her see through the darkness.

She looked straight forward and saw water.

The fifty meter waterfall basin was filled with dark water before her eyes.

To her left across that water was Kegon Falls.

The large cascade’s water raised an excited roar.

The solid downpour struck the water’s surface beyond the mist split by the Aqua Middle Rhythm.

The rumble echoed off the rocky walls surrounding the waterfall.

The reverberation shook the Aqua Middle Rhythm and somewhat numbed her senses.

She absentmindedly glanced over, but then a look of shocked realization covered her face and she shook her head.

She sighed.

She checked the neck and waist of the dry suit and pressed the headphones further into her ears.

She hummed the rhythm of the song so as not to be distracted by the waterfall's roar.

The song would not end for another five minutes and she could control water until then, so she removed her mountain climbing shoes.

Her bare feet were cold on the winter rocks. In another month, Kegon Falls would freeze.

The cold rock seemed to stab into her feet as she walked forward.

On the third step, her feet touched the water.

The power of the Rhythm caused the water at her feet to waver and lose its current.

That December water should have been even colder than the rocks, but…

…It's warm.

It only felt that way because her own Live and the Lives of the water were so similar.

It felt like she was being embraced by someone, but then a voice split through the roar of the cascade.

“Who is that!? What are you doing there!?”

She looked up on reflex and saw someone looking down at her from the viewing platform.

She could see the silhouette of his boxy hat in the sunlamp’s light.

…I was spotted!?

Her body reacted to that thought on reflex.

She ran along the wet rocks.

The splashing of her steps soon rose to her shins and knees.

She ran forward and even deeper.

On the third step, she put on the diving mask.

Someone’s voice was still shouting overhead.

On the seventh step, she leaped forward.

She flew in a parabolic arc and into the water.

She plunged into the darkness embraced by the waterfall basin.

Part 2

10:24 PM

Water surrounded her entire body.

She could breathe because the Aqua Middle Rhythm's power acted just like scuba gear.

To her, the water was no different from viscous air.

The view through her diving mask was dark.

This was not her first time in here because she had helped her father with a few jobs here.

But it was her first time diving here.

The sounds of the wind and waterfall were gone down here. She only heard the low rumble of the water pouring into the basin.

Looking up, the surface glowed a little and she was still only about three meters deep.

She felt a tickling sensation in her the stomach and left leg of the dry suit.

Water was getting in.

…Looks like I didn't repair it all the way.

That was a miscalculation, but she would be fine as long as she had the Aqua Middle Rhythm. She would only end up trembling from the cold once she resurfaced.

After nodding to convince herself of that, she looked down again.

There was only darkness there.

The Aqua Middle music in her ears flowed through her body and altered the current of the water around her.

When she desired to move deeper, the surrounding current started moving down.

With the water compression, the 80,000 Octave volume could reach one meter around her.

Guided by that power, she descended into the basin.

Her hair trailed behind her as she slowly dropped further and further down.

She turned on the maglite and a beam of light stretched through the water.

She could not see the bottom.

…I really am weird for doing this in the winter. That guy up there must think I'm committing suicide.

Around one hundred people committed suicide at Kegon Falls every year.

Her father's job was to dive into the basin and search for their corpses and belongings.

She was currently copying him.

Her motive was pure.

A certain boy had stopped coming here.

The boy had noticeably straight hair, he always seemed to be smiling, and he had been a little older than her.

Unlike her classmates, he had not worn a Device or anything else to fully use a Rhythm.

A somehow lonely atmosphere had surrounded the boy.

He had come here every Sunday for about five years and he had always dropped a single flower while staring into the basin from the viewing platform.

The large, white, rose-like flower had sunk under its own weight instead of floating on the basin's water.

Due to her father's job and her part-time work at the viewing platform's shop, the falls had long been her home ground.

Every week, the boy had arrived, thrown the flower in the basin, and left.

According to the owner of the shop, he had started visiting five years before.

…Did a relative of his kill themselves here?

Two years before, she had asked her father about it out of curiosity.

That was the first time she had heard her father raise his voice in anger.

After telling her not to pay any attention to the boy, he had turned his back and apologized.

"I haven't dived down to the very bottom of the basin since eleven years ago."

She had never asked him about it again.

She had sealed the question in her heart and watched from the shop each week as the boy dropped the flower in the basin.

But he had stopped showing up about a month before.

And yet he had always shown up before, even when the waterfall had frozen.

There had been a sign leading up to it.

One day, he had brought some friends with him.

It had been a weekday afternoon. She had happened to stop by on the way home from middle school and spotted him sitting on the viewing platform railing and speaking with his friends.

The girl had eavesdropped on the conversation from the counter of the café next to the shop.

She had heard the terms “sister” and “flames” as well as the names “Osaka” and “Tokyo”. He had also discussed the Kinki Riot, a student riot that had split Japan between east and west.

…Are they discussing politics?

She had wondered that, but she had not actually asked.

Unable to move, she had simply glanced over at them and listened.

But she had fallen from her chair when one of his friends, a girl with a stole over her shoulders, had suddenly kissed him.

Just as she wondered what they were doing, that girl had spoken some Words.

A red flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in strength

A human heart flows into nothingness

A soldier saves the king

A woman becomes the queen

A sage reminisces

Run without looking to another's path

Choose your own path and sprint

The true path lies in the future

It was a song.

These were the Words one needed to use a Rhythm.

Hearing it had only brought one thought to mind.

…But the flower he throws in the basin is white, not red.

They had then left without even taking a picture.

He had never shown up again.

Each week for the past month, she had thrown a flower in instead.

The flower was sold at a single flower shop in the town at the base of the mountain.

The old lady who ran the flower shop was proud of how early she got up in the morning and she had known the boy. When the girl had found the white flower in the shop, the woman had smiled and spoken of the boy.

"That flower blooms year-round, but it's hard to get your hands on. I'll be losing money with no one to buy it."

So the girl had bought one each week and thrown it into the basin.

…What am I even doing?

Her thoughts cleared inside the water.

She thought about her father's anger and silence, about what could have happened thirteen years ago, about the boy and his friends, about the girl who had kissed him, and about the Words that girl had spoken.

Finally, she focused her thoughts on the boy who had stopped visiting the waterfall.

The answer had to lie at the bottom of the basin.

She dropped straight down in the darkness.

The music flowing into her ears would continue for about three more minutes.

She felt the weighty current of the water on her cheeks. She also felt the water temperature beginning to cool.

The water's traits were growing too strong for the Aqua Middle Rhythm to resist. The water at the bottom of the basin had been

compressed for thousands or even tens of thousands of years, so its Lives were viscous enough to almost be solid.

Instead of leaving it all up to the Rhythm, she swam through the water.

—Fujiwara – Gym Tech – Take – Dive – Hit.

The water rose toward her with the mass of a wall, but she broke through it to continue further down.

Time passed and she started to panic when she still could not see the bottom.

—Fujiwara – Aqua Middle/Gym Tech – Multiple Take – Sink – Hit!

She moved further and further down.

She approached the solution to her questions.

To strengthen her Live, she sang her Words once more.

"…!"

As if to keep her from answering her questions, the water's current would not stop, but she did not stop either.

She swam down to find those answers.

But the water leaping up from the depths became a wind and tried to blow her away.

A thought flashed through her mind.

…If this water is coming up from the very bottom…

Then it might have swept everything away, leaving nothing there.

She was about to reach the point of no return for her Rhythm's music.

Diving any further would be dangerous.

…*Should I go back?*

Her mind suggested that, but her body wished to dive further.

"!"

Her hand reached the MD in her pocket and raised the Octave to about 20,000.

That was her limit.

She swam while listening to a volume she could only just barely control.

A slight change came over the surrounding current, even if it was awkward.

Her body could not defy her Words.

The answer to her questions lay below.

If she found nothing, that would be her answer.

Her body continued swimming despite her hesitation.

She shut off the maglite and continued down with darkness before her.

In her desperation, time seemed to slow.

Her hand broke through the wall of wind created by the water.

A moment later, all motion ground to a halt.

Part 3

10:27 PM

Before she could wonder what had happened, her shoulder slammed into the hard ground.

…*Ow!*

Her hand touched the ground.

It was a somewhat warm stone surface.

The speed of her descent had pressed her face-down against the exposed stone and she stopped moving.

As her exhausted breaths escaped into the water, the air bubbles tickled her cheeks and led her to realize two things.

First, the darkness surrounding her now was quite still.

Second, the intense current had vanished.

…*Where am I?*

She had reached the bottom of the basin.

"…"

Unable to even speak in her heart, she straightened up.

She slowly stood up as if bouncing up inside the dark water.

She sensed the torrent roaring by overhead, but the very bottom was disturbingly quiet.

She had miraculously held onto the maglite, so she shined it around the dark space.

…There's nothing here.

That thought was immediately proven wrong.

There was snow.

White snow drifted in the light before her eyes.

No, it was actually snow-like flower petals.

Her movements had caused the small white flower petals to dance about the bottom of the basin.

She recognized the petals.

They belonged to the white flower the boy and then she had thrown in.

Those petals had become snow and now danced about as if surprised by her sudden visit.

…What is this?

The white snow gently flew through the dark water like cherry blossoms.

…Was he creating this?

Her question led her to walk slowly forward.

She walked to the center of the snow-filled basin and spotted a rock.

The large, pedestal-shaped rock was five meters across and two meters tall.

It had likely broken off of the rock wall above because there was still moss and a tree on the rock.

But she was not looking at the moss or the tree.

She looked to the top of the pedestal where two people lay.

…!?

She lightly kicked off the ground to gently jump through the water and get a better look.

Atop the pedestal covered in white flowers, a boy and girl lay on top of each other.

"…"

She shined her maglite on the two of them.

The one on top was a girl with short hair in a white sailor uniform.

Below her was a boy with long hair in a black school uniform.

Their eyes were closed and they held each other in an embrace.

Their uniforms had some outdated combat gimmicks worked in.

Those gimmicky uniforms and their hair were flowing in the water's current.

…Who are they?

No one was going to answer her and the maglite strayed from those two in order to gain more information.

A long arc reflected the light back at her.

—Fujiwara – Sight Tech – Take – Detect – Hit.

It was a long blade.

The curved blade of a Japanese sword stuck out from the girl on top's back.

The object jutting out of the man on the bottom's chest was likely a spear's shaft.

The spear tip had to be stabbed through his body and into the rock behind him.

The two of them were dead.

The girl only now confirmed that obvious fact, but the idea of death did not feel unpleasant here.

Their hair simply flowed in the current and they almost seemed to be sleeping.

…Who were they?

When she tried to find an answer, she found a Device fallen next to them.

The long spear with a wooden shaft had fallen alongside them on the stone.

Unlike the Devices stabbing them, this spear looked old.

"…"

New questions occurred to the girl.

…Who were they to the boy who was throwing in the flowers?

…Why did they stab each other?

…Why are they smiling?

…What is that spear next to them?

Those two embraced each other in the depths of the water, never to move again. The flower petals danced around them like snow, but they remained silent.

Their deaths and smiles only raised further questions for the visiting girl.

"…?"

Another question mark filled her mind.

A moment later, her Rhythm stopped.

"!"

The water Live vanished from her body.

The chill of the water inside her dry suit stiffened her body.

Her mind was numbed by the loud roar of the water pouring down above.

…*Oh, no!*

It was already too late.

She was going to die.

First, fear raced through her entire body.

Next, the powerful water pressure pressing down on the basin's depths crushed her from every direction.

The pain of the pressure reminded her what divers called the water.

…*Their holy ground.*

An intense pain deep in her ears directly throbbed into her head and the pressure on her stomach forced the air from her lungs.

The snow danced around her.

As she questioned the scattering of those white flower petals, she used all her remaining air to shout.

“Dad!”

Part 4

11:48 PM

“…”

When the girl woke from the dark pain, her vision was filled with bright light.

…Is this heaven!?

She quickly sat up and realized this was a familiar place.

It was the bench on top of the waterfall viewing platform.

The sunlamp was shining in the darkness overhead.

When she identified the artificial light, she let out a white breath.

“It’s cold.”

That was when she realized she was naked.

The blanket that had covered her had fallen from the bench.

There was another blanket over the bench and she could feel the warmth that her own body had given it.

…It really is cold.

She moved to pick up the fallen blanket.

—Fujiwara – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Gazes – Hit!

She looked forward in surprise and several people in the café at the back of the viewing platform quickly turned their backs.

They were all wearing firefighter uniforms, so they were her father's colleagues.

The café's lights were on even though it was after hours and the men drank cans of coffee and glanced back at her.

"Don't look, you idiots!"

She shook her long, lowered hair and hid her body behind the blanket.

"You're the idiot here."

A low male voice spoke from surprisingly close by.

"…!?"

She turned around and found her father sitting on the bench behind her with his back turned.

He wore a borrowed dry suit which was pulled down from his shoulders and a bath towel was draped over the shoulders of his T-shirt.

White steam rose from his shoulders and through the towel.

It was the steam of sweat.

When the girl saw that, she realized what had happened.

So she wrapped herself in the blanket below her butt instead of the one she had picked up.

She then used her feet to push the other blanket toward her father.

“Sorry,” she quietly apologized.

“Who are you apologizing to?”

“You.”

“Only me?”

“And to everyone else. …The chief must have been surprised.”

“That old man just got a prosthetic heart, so try not to surprise him too much.”

The girl nodded silently and stared at the blanket sitting between her and her father.

“Aren’t you going to say anything else?”

“I didn’t think you could use the Aqua Middle.”

“You’re the one that bought me the MD for my birthday last month.”

“I kind of thought I was getting you a coming-of-age present five years early.”

“Didn’t you say something similar to mom when you gave her the engagement ring?”

“And it turned out the same way too. She decided we were getting married right away.”

Her father reached back to grab the blanket, draped it over his shoulders, and continued speaking without looking back.

“What did you see?”

“More questions.”

“Just like your Words.”

“Unlike yours, my Words are full of mysteries.”

“But did you see it?”

“…What was that?”

“You wouldn’t understand even if I told you.”

“Because I’m a child?”

“Then do you understand why those two were smiling?”

“…”

“Once you understand that, you won’t need to know anything about their past.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are two sides to everything. There were smiles even in that tragedy.”

Her father hesitated for a moment.

“Most of us have never told anyone about them for that reason. If we did, it would cause a commotion and disturb their slumber.”

“You mountain men sure are sentimental.”

“That’s because we’re the only ones who know what happened there.”

“Then what about that boy? He was throwing flowers in there.”

Her father turned around, showing her his square face covered in facial hair.

“You’ll understand a little once you enter high school next year. You’ll year about the Mountain and the Kinki Riot.”

“I’m not going to join the Chancellor’s Officers. That’s just my homeroom teacher Takoyama getting all worked up.”

“That isn’t what I meant.” Her father stood up. “You’ll be able to understand your questions even as they remain questions.”

“So you’re telling me to gain the knowledge and experience to do that?”

“I’m telling you to grow up.”

“…You’re always treating me like a child.”

“You’ll be an adult before long. That’s what I meant when I praised you earlier.”

“About what?”

“About surprising me as much as your mother did before we got married.”

He rubbed the girl’s head.

“C’mon, everyone’s worried, so leave those questions for the future and go say hi.”

“The questions never end, huh?” She looked up at her father. “If people can’t fight their Words, this could be a problem.”

“Yeah, you’ll be stuck wondering about your questions forever.”

“Yes, but…”

“But?”

The girl tilted her head.

“Didn’t mom say people’s Words are what will make them happiest?”

She took a breath.

“If so, then what are these questions to me?”

Chapter 1: Protagonists (Prologue) — (12/17/1996)

Part 1

4:25 PM

A boy directly faced the sunset while holding his forehead over his bandanna.

Whenever he lost himself in thought, the scar on his forehead would throb.

Whenever he was nervous and surrounded by enemies, that scar below his bandanna would throb.

And that was why he asked a question with his kind-looking eyes narrowed in a troubled look.

“Um, do we really have to do this because the Emergency Teachers are off duty today?”

Several students holding weapons surrounded the boy on the schoolyard which had been dug up here and there for construction work.

The excellent quality of their weapons was enough to know they were from the Chancellor’s Officers who provided student defense for the Osaka region.

The boy scratched his head as he looked to them, the schoolyard, and the large boxy building of Osaka Prefectural #2 beyond them.

“I can’t believe this… I really don’t think you should be surrounding a transfer student for no reason.”

He really did sound like he could not believe it.

Suddenly, the circle of students around him took a step inwards.

The pressure of their presence caused the boy to hold his chest and take a step back.

That was enough for his back to reach the large concrete wall.

He could not escape.

…Wow, I really can’t believe this.

He complained in his heart, placed a hand on his forehead again, and faced forward.

An odd heat enveloped the group surrounding him.

It was a suspicious heat that bordered on madness and a voice spoke from within it.

“Hizaka Shoui, Class 2-B Student #21, Critical Forcer. What brought you to our school? I don’t see what a Mountain drop-out needs with a school.”

The boy, Hizaka Shoui, raised his head at that.

He silently touched his bandanna and tilted his head.

“Well, it is true even a drop-out from the Mountain’s chancellor training knows more than a university graduate, but…”

“But what?”

“By any chance…*are you bullying little old me because my smarts scare you*?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you moron! Do you think we *want* to pick on a kid who just transferred in!?”

“Th-then why am I being cornered like this? And by the Chancellor’s Officers no less!”

Shoui frantically asked his question while pressing his back against the wall and the others exchanged a glance.

Finally, some voices of doubt escaped them.

“Hey…”

“What?”

“Are you sure this is the guy who trained at the Mountain for two whole years?”

“Yeah, I thought he would be weird since he spent two years when it normally takes half a year, but I didn’t expect this …”

“Maybe he was so bad at it he was held back that long.”

“It could be. All he’s been doing is complain.”

“He looks really weak to me.”

“That he does.”

“But Saki-san seems to know something about this.”

“Hey, hey, hey. I’m the one in trouble here, so don’t leave me out of the conversation.”

Shoui shouted back at the people talking about him loud enough that he did not need to use a Tech to hear it.

“What is this, anyway!? It’s my first day here, so what is this all about!?”

“You’ve been judged to be highly dangerous, obviously.”

A sharp voice broke through the crowd and the crowd split apart.

—Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

A tall, slender boy with a spear in hand walked straight through the center of everyone’s gazes.

His short-cut blond hair and sunglasses stood out the most.

The tip of his spear shined in the setting sun.

It shined with a scarlet light.

“!”

A phantom pain ran through Shoui’s forehead when he saw the almost damp scarlet light on the blade.

Instead of the earlier prickling pain, this was powerful enough to wake him up.

…This is bad.

The phantom pain from the reflected light replayed a certain image in the back of his mind.

It was a scene from the past.

A raised spear was swung down through the darkness to split open his forehead.

He felt blood spraying from his forehead, he was filled with a scorching pain, and…

…*Yuuki.*

A girl's name appeared in his heart, but…

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Self-Control – Hit!

After three heartbeats and some sweat on his back, he endured the replaying of his past and his fear.

The next thing he knew, the spear boy stood right in front of him.

"…"

They were five meters away from each other.

At just a few steps apart, the boy pulled a memo pad from his pocket using the hand not holding the spear.

He looked back and forth between Shoui's face and the memo pad before asking a question.

"Hizaka Shoui. You have a tendency to compromise, so it's never clear what you're thinking. You used to live at the Nandaimon Shrine,

you trained at the Mountain for two years, and…now you're a Dis-Worder. Is that accurate?"

"Y-yes. Perfectly accurate."

Shoui looked the boy in the eye and quickly nodded several times.

The boy nodded just once.

"I see. I understand now."

"Oh, good. You understand? Can we handle this peacefully now?"

"Yes, I understand you need to be executed."

"What?"

"So we'll be sending you to the hospital."

Shoui pointed at the boy who was still calmly staring at the memo pad.

"Y-y-y-y-y-you rotten monster! What's going on here!?"

"The details don't matter. Word Accelerator Ixolde is being activated the day after tomorrow, so could you stay away from here until then?"

"I have no idea what you're even talking about! Please give me a logical explanation!"

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Intimidation – Hit!

The boy must have realized what the look in Shoui's eyes meant because he gave him an upturned look and spoke.

“You spent two years at the Mountain before they kicked you out and you still didn’t become a Chancellor, so why are you joining our Prefectural #2 just before Ixolde’s activation? …After all, Prefectural #2 is home to the Osaka Chancellor’s Officers Headquarters and current Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou.”

“Eh? W-well, I’d always wanted to go to school here. Besides, what’s wrong with me being here?”

“Why would you want to go to school here?”

“Well, it’s a mixed boys and girls school and it even has student dorms to live in.”

The boy silently held his spear below his right arm in preparation to fight.

“Ah, I can’t believe you! You just ignored everything I said, didn’t you!?”

“Shut up. I’m First Special Duty Officer Saki Seiji. As head of intelligence, I will eliminate you here.”

“I can’t believe this. I’m no good at fighting Strike Forcers, you know?”

“Oh? …Hizaka Shoui, I’ve long heard rumors of you and your lack of Words.”

“Wow, am I famous? I can’t believe it… Really, I’m gonna blush. What do I do?”

“Quit wiggling around. At the very least, any fighter these days will have heard your name somewhere or another. …Except for the last two years, that is.”

“…”

“Normally, you have to be sixteen to undergo chancellor training at the Mountain and it only lasts a year. So why did you go the Mountain at fifteen and what were you doing for those two years?”

“That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Hm? …What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t really matter. More importantly, could you maybe do something about this current situation?”

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Expression Decoding – Hit.

“I guess not.”

“Oh? Is that how it looks?”

“I don’t think anyone could see it differently. I can’t believe this. And I’m supposed to be the ultimate pacifist. Nowadays, anyway.”

“ ‘Nowadays’? Then what about two years ago?”

“Two years ago?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Saki nodded and a slight smile entered his voice. “On that snowy night when you, a guest at the Nandaimon Shrine, made the Koto Guardian kill someone.”

“…”

Shoui did not respond.

He remained silent.

He only pressed his back against the wall and lowered his bandanna.

He touched the scar on his forehead through the bandanna.

The bandanna was mounted on a forehead protector which was split in two down the center.

He touched the cold metal edge and took a deep breath.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Self-Control – Hit.

As he controlled his heart, words filled it rather than images.

…Childhood friend.

…My own lack of Words.

…My duty to protect her.

…Her injury and her eye.

…Murderer.

"Do you see how dangerous you are now? From our perspective, we have no idea why you lack the Words all of us have, you've undergone some unknown training for an excessive amount of time, and you're friends with a murderer."

Shoui remained silent and his vision was mostly covered by his bandanna.

This was a method he had learned over the past two years. At the very least, his vision would not pick up any blades swung down toward him.

But he could hear his opponent.

“Whatever your situation is, your words are going to fall on deaf ears. All that matters are the facts I laid out for you. Understand?”

“In other words, you don’t want to have a deactivated time bomb anywhere near you?”

“At the very least, we don’t want you coming to this school until Ixolde’s activation is complete. Will you take a hit from my Pressure High and spend the time in the hospital, or will you stay home on your own? It’s your choice.”

“I can’t believe this. I don’t like either of those options… I really can’t believe this.”

“Then let me give you one piece of information.”

Saki used his empty hand to tell the other students to back away.

“It may not have reached your ears, but Koto Guardian and Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki currently has a certain Urban Name.”

“An Urban Name?”

“Killing Holder.”

Saki gave a brief answer and continued with a bitter smile.

“It means she holds death inside herself. Since she killed someone.”

Shoui's body gave a single quick tremor at the word "kill".

But his silence did not seem to bother Saki Seiji.

"So what'll it be? At this rate, I'll be acting as a member of the Chancellor's Officers to eliminate someone I've deemed dangerous…but how do you want this to end, 'Dog of Nandaimon' Hizaka Shoui-kun?"

"I can't believe this."

Shoui's voice remained light and his shoulders drooped.

After a beat, he immediately took action.

Part 2

4:31 PM

Shoui jumped straight up.

—Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Great Leap – Hit.

His long leap gave him plenty of air time and his blue uniform-wearing form landed on top of the wall between the schoolyard and street.

Without losing his balance, the wind washed over him five meters from the ground.

Below him, he could see Saki Seiji, the students who had surrounded him, and the schoolyard dug up for construction.

"Is that for Ixolde, the giant word accelerator installed underground? This place looks like a tilled field."

“What are you talking about? The Nandaimon Shrine was the only place that opposed creating the ultimate Rhythm using Ixolde. What about you!?”

“What about me? Sorry, I’m not interested in politics.”

“Then what are you interested in!?”

Shoui suddenly brought his fists to his waist and spread his hands.

“!”

The Chancellor’s Officers students scattered at the combat stance.

“I’m interested in…”

He used his spread hands to mime grabbing something from below.

“First of all, girls.”

His tone was entirely serious.

“Next would be honor and finally money. Aren’t those the main three driving forces for guys?”

He asked with his serious expression intact and received only silence in response.

The wind blew and more silence followed.

Finally, he looked down at the others and asked a question.

“Am I…wrong?’

“That settles it. I’m killing you even if I don’t have a good reason.”

Saki pointed his spear at Shoui and clicked his tongue.

“Besides, you’re a hell of a guy. Even with a Tech, jumping up onto a five meter wall isn’t easy.”

“That’s because I don’t want to fight if I don’t have to. I’ll jump five meters if it means getting out of this.”

“You went to that much effort to weasel your way out of this!? Hey! Don’t run away!”

“Oh, c’mon. I’m just heading out to play until you’ve all left and I can sneak into the dorm behind the school building. I still have to unpack my things.”

“That’s called running away!”

“Oh, what a quick retort.”

“Why you…”

“Calm down. There’s no rule saying you have to accept a fight someone picks with you, is there? Right? Right?”

Shoui lifted the bandanna from his eyes and smiled.

“And with that, I’ll be going. Farewell.”

With a quick wave, he tried to jump back, but…

“I’m not letting you get away, you moron!”

—Saki – Draw Tech – Take – Throw – Hit!

The spear rotated as it flew toward Shoui. He had just taken his stance to jump, so it audibly slammed into the side of his waist.

“Wah!”

It did little damage, but the inertia of the rotating spear knocked him to the side.

He fell from the wall and into the schoolyard again.

—Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Land – Hit.

He spun through the air and managed to land right next to the main gate.

He could leave the school ground by taking a jump backwards, but…

“I said I’m not letting you get away!”

Saki charged forward with a weapon shaped like a short sword.

When he swung it, the hilt extended to create a spear.

This was a new spear.

When Shoui realized his enemy had not lost his weapon, his mouth tensed.

“H-h-h-h-ow many of those do you have!? No fair!”

“Just shut up and die!”

With that conclusion, Saki used his empty hand to stick headphones into his left ear.

—Saki – Spear Tech/Pressure High Rhythm – Take – Charge – Hit.

Saki’s Words were spoken in a low, quiet voice.

Heaven, please answer the longing found in the sky of my final moments

Simply let the white snow fall on the heavy darkness as you raise your cry

The spear tip flew straight toward Shoui’s gut as a black force of high gravity surrounded it.

A hit from that would take out two or three ribs in a concentrated attack.

“…!”

Shoui did not respond by singing or uttering his Words. Instead, he stuck his left hand in his pocket and his right straight forward.

…Will I make it in time!?

He shut his eyes and wished for power in his heart.

In that instant, his right fist stuck Saki’s spear.

“!”

The explosion lasted only a brief moment.

The black light burst with a sound like a breaking board.

The spear shattered and Saki was knocked backwards.

“The hell!?”

—Saki – Gym Tech – Take – Landing Control – Hit.

Shoui, on the other hand, remained motionless. His right fist was still held forward and he stared silently at Saki.

Saki’s gaze turned toward Shoui’s right fist and Shoui listened to his question.

“What is that!?”

Saki was pointing at the black light residing in Shoui’s right fist.

Lives at an Octave of about 100,000 had emitted a powerful Word Color and summoned some ether.

“Did you instantly call in the same Pressure High as me without using any Words!?”

Shoui did not answer.

To let the music of a Rhythm flow through one’s body, the user normally had to sing their own Words and place the Rhythm’s Message inside those Words.

But Shoui never sung the necessary Words when he used a Rhythm.

In fact, he could not sing them.

That was why his Urban Name was Dis-Worder.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” said Saki. “Can you use any Rhythm indiscriminately because you don’t have the individuality of Words?”

“I don’t know how it ended up like this, but it seems I’m a popular guy when it comes to Rhythms.”

“…”

“Um, by any chance, are you still going to try to fight?”

“Yeah…”

Saki Seiji stuck a hand in his pocket and pulled out another new spear.

Shoui looked up into the sky when he saw his opponent’s weapon.

“Ahh… Can’t you stop this?”

“I have no reason to.”

“But I really don’t get why I’m being attacked here.”

“Then let me tell you one thing.”

“?”

Saki pointed the new spear Shoui’s way.

—Saki – Talk Tech – Take – Long-Distance Conversation – Hit!

The movements of Saki’s lips became noise which sounded directly in Shoui’s ears.

Only Shoui could hear these words.

“Ever since the Kinki Riot thirteen years ago, Osaka’s 1st Special Duty Officer has been given the following information.”

“Information?”

“The Dis-Worder must not be allowed near Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers.”

“Th-that’s completely unscientific!”

“This information is backed by something that I can’t tell the likes of you about. But if you knew what I did, you’d probably leave the city of your own volition.”

Saki’s words were backed by absolute confidence.

“Plenty of people lose their Words due to aphasia or other disorders, but every decade or so, one moron impaired by that silence will still rush into the world of Rhythms and Words. This year, it’s you.”

“But this wasn’t supposed to be an unlucky year… Are you sure you can’t overlook me?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. You’ve heard the theory that people without Words of their own can influence other people’s Words, haven’t you?”

Saki switched back on the MD in his pocket.

The Pressure High Rhythm’s music replayed from the beginning.

“In that case, your actions could easily influence Osaka during the tension of the Ixolde problem. Do you get what that means?”

Saki took a step forward, but his aura was completely different now.

Instead of observing or asking a question of his opponent, he simply moved forward.

Shoui took a defensive stance.

…I can't believe this. How am I supposed to escape?

He lowered his hips in preparation to move.

At the same time, Saki charged forward.

"Seaaaaaaahhhh!"

He pulled his spear back as far as it would go as he made his charge, but he never finished his war cry.

Something unexpected cut in between Saki and Shoui.

It was a wind.

The air gently fluttered and a shimmering of heat rose between the two boys.

"Is this-…!?"

Before Saki could finish his question, a voice raced in a straight line across the schoolyard.

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!"

It was a deep male voice speaking a simple, monosyllabic Word.

That Word caused the air to explode.

The tearing raced across the schoolyard in a straight line.

The destructive roar created an echoing ensemble.

“!?”

The tearing wind and impact slammed into the ground.

Dirt and sand were blasted skyward with a great noise.

…This Rhythm!?

“Is that Kusanagi, the ogre-slaying Wind Rhythm!?”

Before Shoui was even done speaking, a loud metallic sound instantaneously distorted the surrounding scenery.

And before that distortion returned to normal, the great roar suddenly vanished.

The sudden silence was followed by plenty of dirt and sand falling from the sky.

And in that downpour of dirt, Shoui was looking toward the schoolyard gate instead of at Saki.

The attack had flown form that direction and two people stood there.

One was a boy and the other a girl.

The boy wore a student combat coat and raised a sword in his two false arms.

The girl wore personal clothes and her long ponytail fluttered in the wind as she brushed it back with a false arm far too large for her body.

The previous attack had been made by a diagonal upwards slash of the boy’s sword.

He spoke as he sheathed the sword.

“What are you doing, Saki? Depending on your answer, I, Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou, will pass my judgment on you.”

Nanba Souichirou looked to Shoui and Saki with his one eye.

Shoui whistled at the one-eyed gaze.

“Wow. I can see how you slayed an ogre with that.”

“You don’t think our Chancellor’s a Chancellor, do you?”

“But I was complimenting him. …Man, that’s way more powerful than the Over Rhythms we use.”

His eyes briefly stopped on the sword guard eyepatch, but then he looked to the girl standing next to Nanba Souichirou.

The ponytailed girl with a giant false arm attached to her left shoulder bent her eyes in a cheerful expression before staring intently at Shoui.

When their gazes met, her mouth moved.

“It’s been a year, Shoui. How’ve ya been?”

“Oh, it’s you, boss.”

When he heard Shoui’s troubled expression, Souichirou turned toward the girl behind him.

The girl nodded.

“That guy…Shoui’s, well, a friend of mine.”

She smiled a little.

“It was beatin’ him at the Mountain last year that got me my spot as Nagoya Chancellor.”

“Don’t tell them that, boss! You’ll hurt their impression of me!”

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, it’s good to see ya again.”

She took a breath.

“Shoui, if ya get caught in anythin’ too weird, I, Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko, will give ya some advice in place of your parents. …Okay?”

When they heard that, a stir ran through the boys spread out in the schoolyard.

Hearing those overlapping voices, Shoui held his forehead over his bandanna.

The phantom pain had vanished at some point.

Part 3

5:39 PM

In south Nara Prefecture, a hill existed on the border between the cities of Nara and Koriyama.

It was a small hill.

Just an hour before, the setting sun had washed over the slope and trees, but it was now dyed in the pale color of the moonlight.

The most moonlight reached the top of the hill which contained a large one-story estate and a single large shrine colored by vermilion lacquer.

It was a large shrine with sanctuaries on either side.

An old wooden panel was nailed to the eaves of the shrine.

The panel had fallen into darkness and had grown dark from the rain and dew, but the stickily shining lacquered writing was still visible.

It said Nandaimon Shrine.

Nandaimon referred to the Suzakumon and the Rashoumon.

During the Nara period, a city had existed on the plain visible from this hill.

Heijou-kyo, Nagaoka-kyo, and Heian-kyo.

The great gate built to protect those cities from the south was known as Nandaimon.

Nandaimon Shrine was the shrine that worshiped Nandaimon.

As time passed, the city had transformed and Nandaimon had been remade several times, so Nandaimon Shrine had been moved to the hill where the gate would be visible no matter where it moved. Over a thousand years were said to have passed since.

Needless to say, Nandaimon itself had vanished during that long time and the shrine had been remade a few times.

Only the cherry and pine trees on the hilltop accurately recorded the passage of time.

A silent winter chill surrounded those trees as a slight breeze and produced a lonely rustling from the leaves.

Called by the rustling, the chill sitting in the shrine's grounds began to move.

That chill called someone in.

A single figure used the path to the shrine to climb into the winter wind.

It was a girl whose long black hair shined in the moonlight.

Hidden below that black hair was a blazer red enough to be seen even in the moonlight.

The uniform had a feminine yet weighty outline and the wearer held a large staff in her right hand.

The right arm wielding the staff had large writing stitched into the blouse's shoulder.

The golden stitching that shined in the moonlight said "Koto Guardian".

That title belonged to the individual who put to rest the spirits in the grounds of the Koto region to prevent natural disasters.

She silently finished climbing the shrine path and stepped onto the gravel of the shrine grounds.

The wind blew gently as if stirred up by her refreshing footsteps.

It cut across the shrine grounds, past the main temple, and to the side of the estate.

The footsteps on gravel soon stopped as they followed the wind. The girl had stopped walking.

She looked up to the moon and the moonlight covered her face.

The bespectacled features were those of a girl with hint of sharpness.

A single color could be seen in the pale moonlight on her face: red.

It was the color of her right eye.

In the shadows, a faint red light filled that eye like a fire opposing the moon.

It was a false eye.

She used that eye to view a point in the sky, as if searching for something.

She spent a few seconds like that.

“One hour until the Suzaku reaches its standard position.”

Her lips barely moved to form the words and she lowered her gaze once more.

Instead of the sky, she looked to the Nandaimon estate where she lived.

Light filled the one-story vermilion estate that measured more than thirty meters across.

She had family there.

But the girl's face still showed no hint of an expression.

Her thoughts were a complete mystery.

And…

"…"

After a moment, she turned around without speaking a word.

She turned left and her footsteps on the gravel took her to the estate's detached room.

She walked over to the small detached room placed alongside one of Nandaimon's sanctuaries.

She heard a sudden metallic sound from her left.

It was a bell.

Her left hand held a key attached to a small keyring.

At the same time, the footsteps on gravel stopped.

But she had not stopped. There was simply no more gravel on the ground.

There was a five square meter area of exposed dirt in front of the detached room.

Even in just the moonlight, it was obvious that ground was oddly hard.

That dirt ground had been packed down so much that not a single weed was allowed to grow through and it smoothly reflected the moonlight.

As she crossed the dirt, she saw a single wooden pillar standing up from the center of the small clearing.

It was thirty centimeters thick and about two meters tall, it contained several shallow mortar-like indentations, and the top was badly broken.

Her left hand touched one of the many indentations driven into the pillar.

A bell rang and her hand stroked across the gentle curves of the indentation.

The curves were identical to the ones that formed a human fist.

"…"

The bell rang again and she walked forward.

A few steps were all it took to arrive in front of the detached room's main entrance.

She did not hesitate to stick her key into the sliding door's lock.

Part 4

5:45 PM

The bell rang and the door opened.

In the moonlight and gentle breeze, the girl remained motionless in front of the small rectangle of darkness.

The wind searched through and washed over that darkness as her eyes turned to the nameplate next to the door.

The old, darkened nameplate gave a certain boy's name: Hizaka Shoui.

She simply stared at the name without really reading it.

A few beats later, she suddenly moved. She stepped into the darkness and into the detached room's entranceway.

Closing the door further darkened the already dark room.

The external world was shut out.

All she could see was the moonlight shining in from the glass of the front sliding door, but she reached an arm into the darkness without relying on that light.

"…"

A bright fluorescent light turned on.

She leaned her staff against the small entranceway's wall.

The sound of the staff bottom hitting the concrete floor reverberated solidly through the entranceway.

Next, silence fell.

After a few breaths, she very quietly opened the sliding door dividing the entranceway from the room itself.

She almost seemed to be trying to spy on who or what was inside.

After confirming that the dark space was fully opened, she removed her shoes, climbed the step, and made sure her shoes were properly aligned.

The series of actions had clearly become a habit.

She was now standing on the detached room's tatami mat floor and she switched on the light here too.

At about seven square meters, the room before her eyes was only meant as a space to sleep in.

There was no closet and an unmarked futon was still folded up on the floor.

A large sand-colored dresser sat in front of the identically colored wall.

The only thing on the wall was a calendar hanging next to the dresser.

It was truly a dreary room.

It had almost no coloration. Everything was either the color of the walls or the color of the tatami mats.

Someone had clearly avoided bringing any color into the room as a way to suppress something. It felt like a method of restricting oneself.

The girl's vermilion uniform stood out strongly below the fluorescent light.

Her eyes turned to the calendar on the wall.

It contained a picture of a snowy Kyoto mountain along with the days for December, the current month.

However, the year given on the calendar was 1994, which was two years in the past.

The girl remained silent when she saw that.

Her eyes then moved to top of the dresser. The owner of the room had allowed two pieces of color there.

The first was a folded karate uniform.

It had somewhat faded from numerous washings and a black belt lay with it.

The name Hizaka was spelled out at the end of the belt in bright gold, somewhat twisted stitching.

The other color sat next to it.

It was a trophy.

The extravagant trophy rose almost to the ceiling and the shine of its gold plating had not dulled in the slightest.

A vermilion and white ribbon was double-knotted at the top.

Without speaking a word, the girl faced the futon folded up in the corner.

Some new colors had been added behind the futon: a red vacuum cleaner, a metal bucket, and a dry rag on the rim of the bucket.

Those colors looked out of place in the monotone, sand-colored room, but she did not seem to care as she reached for the vacuum cleaner.

But then…

"Yuuki."

She slowly turned toward a voice from outside the detached room.

A woman's voice came from the large window on the east end of the room.

She did not hesitate to unlock the window and open it to either side.

The empty night spread out before her eyes.

A square of bright light fell onto the tightly packed dirt ground out front.

Two figures stood there.

One was the wooden pillar rising from the dirt and the other was a short old woman.

The woman wore a shirt and jeans and she had a slight smile on her aged face.

"Doing your daily cleaning, Yuuki? You sure are faithful."

A hint of a bitter smile filled the lighthearted tone, but the girl called Yuuki said nothing in response.

The old woman realized her teasing would accomplish nothing, so she placed a hand on her back and looked directly at Yuuki.

“A Nandaimon child was attacked at Private Showa, so weren’t you on your way to deal with that?”

“I still have sixty-seven minutes until the designated time. This is a duel following the school rules, so they won’t run away.”

“If you give them that much time, I expect they’ll gather some friends to help. You do always tell them they’re free to get help, after all.”

“I prefer to take care of those pathetic people all at once. More importantly, what do you really want, Grandma Senga.”

The old woman looked up at Yuuki with a look of exasperation.

“They’re holding a meeting between the Chubu and Kansai Chancellors at Prefectural #2, but are you really not joining them?”

“What good would the Killing Holder do there?”

“Really? Are you sure it isn’t that you don’t want to disturb things too much? Like with the Nagoya Chancellor and-…”

—Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Intimidation – Hit.

—Senga – Mind Tech – Counter-Take – Intimidation Reflection – Hit.

“You sure do get scary when it comes to that topic, Yuuki.”

“And you get in a bad mood when I mention your spear,” said Yuuki. “Specifically, that Yuuki Senga was known as Kansai’s greatest spear-user but that she set aside her spear thirteen years ago.”

With that line, silence ruled their surroundings.

But that rule of silence was broken by a movement rather than a sound.

Senga shrugged her shoulders in exasperation.

And…

“Then how about this information? …That idiot Shoui has returned from the Mountain.”

She looked up as if to peer into Yuuki’s face, but the girl gave no visible reaction.

“I see.”

When the girl accepted the fact without even nodding, Senga frowned and leaned against the wooden pillar next to her.

“Is that all? Don’t you have something to say to him? Like why he didn’t stop by to say hi, about two years ago, or maybe that you’ve been cleaning this place ever since?”

“It’s no use.”

“What?”

“None of that would make bring him back.”

With that, Yuuki turned her back on Senga.

Her eyes fell on the karate uniform and trophy on top of the dresser.

A question from Senga reached her silent back.

“You don’t want to see him?”

“…”

“Or are you no longer waiting for him?”

“…”

“Do you not need a man who doesn’t keep the promise he made to you?”

Yuuki moved her head in response to that question.

It made the small up and down of a nod.

“I don’t need Hizaka Shoui.”

Senga had stopped talking, so Yuuki took over.

“It’s not possible for a guy like that to protect me.”

“That’s quite a statement. It’s not possible even though he won the West Japan Middle School Karate Championship? He won that title by defeating Ichimura Yuusei in the finals, but isn’t Ichimura now Nagoya’s Vice Chancellor who you’ve asked to spar with a few times since?”

“I don’t need anyone else’s opinion.”

“Then in your own opinion, do you truly think you don’t need him?”

“…”

“Even after picking him up from the ruins left by the Kinki Riot, healing his aphasia…and spending so much time with him?”

"…"

"If so, why have you been taking such good care of this detached room for the past two years?"

"It's a linchpin," said Yuuki. "The linchpin needed to keep the Killing Holder the Killing Holder."

With that said, she closed the window behind her.

With a sharp sound, the light was cut off from the night.

Only the lingering tone remained in the air.

Chapter 2: Everyone's Movements (Basic Controls Tutorial)

Part 1

7:11 PM

One of Osaka's landmarks was a tower known as the Tsutenkaku.

It was about one hundred meters tall, it towered above the streets of houses and shops, and no thought had been given to the danger of it collapsing. There was a small plaza around its base, but that was it.

The hundred meter tower sat right alongside people's homes.

The structure brought the word "local" to mind.

Currently, a boy stood on the tile-covered stone pavement below the Tsutenkaku.

It was Hizaka Shoui.

He drank a can of coffee while looking to the city lights shining into the dark night.

He was waiting for a girl.

That girl was Yamashita Taeko who he had met at Prefectural #2's front gate.

"Later, let's meet up at that place called the Tsutenkaku. I'll treat ya to some food once the meetin's over."

He had been obediently following her casual suggestion, but…

"It's been almost two hours now. And curfew was at seven…"

He looked up, wishing he had walked around Osaka for a bit instead.

Far overhead near the top of the Tsutenkaku, the bottom of the observation deck looked like a dark shadow.

He had not looked up at that tower for a long time.

Even after two years, Osaka remained the same as in his faint memories.

Not long before, he had learned that it was his own situation that had changed so drastically.

…I didn't stick with that training for two years because I wanted to…

It was true he had gained permission to enter the Mountain during the winter two years before, even though he had not been in high school yet.

His training should have ended half a year after that, but for some reason, he had repeated the same training four times.

That previous Chancellor's Officers member may have been right that it simply was not for him.

Still looking up, Shoui leaned his back against one of the pillars forming the Tsutenkaku's base.

He brought a hand to the bandanna on his forehead.

There was no phantom pain, but it would appear if he tried to remember.

Everything from that time would come rushing back if he thought back to what had happened one night during the winter two years before.

"…"

It had all begun two years ago.

It had been a night with a chilly wind when he had made Yuuki Yuuki, history's youngest Koto Guardian and Koto Chancellor, kill someone

It had been a cold night.

Everyone had been holed up in their homes, the only lights in the streets had come from windows, and a silent liveliness had seemed to highlight one's existence like a form of shadow puppetry.

The same had been true of the shopping district in front of Nara's Kofuku-ji.

There was a park there containing a large lake called Sarusawa Lake.

During the day, the locals would have been resting in the park, but it was simply an empty space with a lake during the night.

A wind had carried a sobering chill as it had raced across the lake and through the park.

Shoui had been with Yuuki there.

He had sat on the stone bank of the lake while she wore a red blazer.

They had not been looking each other in the eye and Shoui had been holding his reddened right cheek.

“Do you really need to slap me just because I touched your butt, Yuuki?”

He had called her name, but the intellectual face behind her glasses had not turned his way.

That was due to the headphones in her ears.

A terribly refreshing holy sound had escaped them.

Based on the volume he could hear, it had to be easily over an Octave of 320,000.

“The Geist Middle Rhythm…”

His words had trailed off and vanished because he had noticed the many lights floating around her.

The lights had been the size of a fist.

Those cool, bluish-white fluorescent lights had flown around her, landed on her shoulders, hair, and hands, left her again, and continued to dance about.

The light had illuminated her black hair, white skin, and red clothing, making it all stand out in the darkness.

He had briefly watched in fascination, but then he had come to his senses.

“Y-Yuuki, that’s too many spirits… If you’re dragged in…”

She had not turned toward him, so he had sighed with a look of exasperation.

Her lips had begun to sing a refreshing song as if his sigh had been a sign.

—Yuuki – Geist Middle – Take – Speak with the Dead – Hit.

The winter cries out frigidly

Someone cries in loneliness

They speak words yet nothing is said

They speak Words yet nothing is said

They simply wait for the ice to melt

They draw near and never give up

As he listened to her Words, Shoui had looked to the lights floating around her.

“They draw near and never give up, huh? That fits perfectly for the spirits in Koto that can’t rest in peace, but in a way, those are really dark Words.”

She had finally turned around at that.

“That can’t be helped. My Words were originally for an ice god.”

“…You could hear me?”

“I could hear all the awful things you said about me.”

“Is that so?” He had rested his head in his hand. “It’s weird that you can communicate with the spirits of the dead without using specialized Words.”

“You’re the weird one, Shoui-kun. What with being a Dis-Worder and all.”

He had shrugged at that.

“I don’t really mind.”

“But it is weird. People normally get these powers from Rhythms, but you can use them all without a Rhythm.”

“But it’s all weakened since I don’t recite any Words. Even with High Rhythm powers, an Octave of 150,000 is the most I can manage.”

“I wonder why. Why don’t you have your own Words?”

“Well, wouldn’t that be because during the Kinki Riot-…”

He had smiled bitterly and lightly shaken his head.

“Because my wife has been sucking them out of me every night?”

Yuuki had narrowed her eyes offensively when she heard that.

“You moron… Did you forget your promise?”

“Ha ha. I remember that promise just fine.”

“And I just had you promise again the day before yesterday. …Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Your hand.”

Yuuki's words and gaze had fallen toward Shoui's hand touching her butt through her skirt.

"What's so fun about that?"

—Yuuki – Mind Tech – Take – Intimidation – Hit.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Counter-Take – Intimidation Reflection – Hit.

"You're right. I probably need to stick my hand up your skirt for it to be really fun."

"What do you mean 'need'?"

"You're the one that begged me with the ends of your eyebrows lowered last nigh- ow, ow, ow, ow! Is that really worth a backhand blow!?"

"Honestly, why do you have to bring up those things?"

"You're the one that asked!"

"Shut up. Anyway, why are you here?"

"Um…"

"I'll push you in the lake? Five, four, three…"

"Don't count so fast! Um, Grandma Senga contacted me and said representatives of each region are holding a meeting about Ixolde. It's apparently about whether to run a startup test."

"I see." Yuuki had nodded. "A startup test, hm? That tragedy may be more than a decade old now, but I still can't believe they're trying to

create the ultimate Rhythm with that giant word accelerator. Prefectural #2's Chancellor's Officers are really being a nuisance."

—Shoui – School Tech –Take – Recall Memory – Hit.

"Either way, Prefectural #2 was only recently built, so it's the only place that can gather the funds needed for that kind of facility. The academy rules ban financial support from corporations and the government, after all."

"Shoui-kun, you intend to go to Prefectural #2 next year, don't you?"

"Your grandma is too strict, so she won't open Nandaimon up to boys."

"There were apparently some boys as guards just after the Kinki Riot twelve years ago, but things have calmed down now with Japan still split between east and west."

"Ixolde is going to bring some trouble, though. Tokyo sees the ultimate Rhythm as a danger, so they've held several world-class meetings about it, right?"

"Yes, but Osaka loves being the best in Japan." Yuuki had sighed without changing her expression much. "In the past, they even crushed our plans to build a tower called Babel. …Well, I guess there's nothing we can do about that."

Yuuki had stood up and Shoui had followed her lead.

Their difference in age had put a difference in their heights.

Yuuki was a year older than Shoui, so her eyes were positioned one step above his.

She had looked down at him and removed the MD headphones from her ears.

“Well, it’s my job, so I have to go. Where’s the meeting?”

“At Prefectural #2 of course. You have to change trains three times.”

Just as the two of them had started walking, the north wind had blown in.

A moment later…

—Shoui – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit!

Suddenly, Yuuki’s glasses had shattered and a Japanese sword had thrust up.

“Yuuki!?”

Her body had floated up and fallen onto its back with a dull sound.

“…Uuh.”

She had made a small groan on the ground and covered her right eye with a hand.

Blood had spilled from between her fingers.

When Shoui had seen it, he had started to run over.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

He had turned around.

—Shoui – Sight/Dodge Tech – Multiple Auto-Take – Dodge – Hit!

He had rolled forward on reflex as a silver arc swept by overhead.

“Wah…toh!”

He had punched the ground to propel himself back to his feet and he had faced forward.

A tall boy in a combat coat student uniform had stood there with a bloody sword.

Shoui had recognized his somewhat slanted eyes and tense face.

“Nagoya Vice Chancellor Yamashita Gihei!? …What’s someone that important doing here!?”

Without even nodding, Yamashita had suddenly released his Words.

The Words had contained an intense low rumbling that called in lightning.

At that point, the phantom pain ran through Shoui’s forehead.

That pain came from the wound he had received soon afterwards.

“…!”

He had known he had to win, but his memories refused to play back any further.

He returned to reality.

He was below the Tsutenkaku and not by the Sarusawa Lake in Koto.

What had happened afterwards raced through his mind as facts, not as memories.

…Breaking my promise, murder, and a unilateral farewell.

"If only I hadn't passed out…"

The pulse behind those words was racing.

Once his vision returned, all five senses grew clearer.

He realized he was now sitting down with his legs outstretched and his back still against the Tsutenkaku's pillar.

The can of coffee lay by his feet with its contents pooled up around it.

He smiled bitterly, but then heard the continuation of the lightning Words that marked the end of his memories.

Part 2

7:21 PM

They were Words and they were sung in a female voice unlike the voice of that former enemy.

Nobody takes the middle road

Nothing lives or dies

It all either falls into ruin or survives

Everyone, everyone, everyone

The Words reverberated in the singer's throat with a somewhat fast tempo and they contained a rumble much like thunder.

Shoui knew whose voice that was.

“Boss!?”

He turned around to find Taeko standing there.

“Were ya waitin’ long?”

“Eh? Yes, a very long time.”

“Ya sure are honest,” replied Taeko with a slight smile.

She laughed out loud and used her giant false left arm to grab Shoui’s collar as he sat on the ground.

“Ya really don’t change, do ya!? I wouldn’t have it any other way, though!”

He was quickly lifted up higher than her and he sighed while dangling down like his clothes were placed on a hanger.

“I’m glad to see you haven’t changed either, boss.”

“Of course I haven’t. In Nagoya, we take pride in the fact that we don’t change no matter where we go. More importantly…”

“?”

“Can ya go up on the Tsutenkaku this late?”

“They close at six. See?”

Shoui pointed toward the gate at the bottom of the tower that was only lit by the emergency lighting now.

Realizing the truth, Taeko sighed in obvious disappointment.

“Ahh, ahh. If only the meetin’ had ended sooner.”

“What was the meeting about? Or is that a secret?”

“Ixolde’s gonna be activated in two days, so they needed our final approval. Ixolde’s pretty neat on the inside.”

“Oh, you went inside?”

Taeko showed off her white teeth in a smile.

“Well, all the important bits were still closed off behind shutters. They showed us a room full of computers and stuff, though.”

“I see…”

“Is something the matter?”

“So all the Kansai Chancellors really are gathered at #2?”

“Not all. Kobe’s still a mess after that earthquake last year, so they haven’t selected a new Chancellor. And Kanazawa never responded to the request and didn’t send anyone.”

Taeko lowered Shoui.

Even when standing, she was about three sizes taller than him and she looked at him with a perfect look of indifference.

“Then again, yer precious Koto Chancellor didn’t show up either, sayin’ she had other business to take care of. I was hopin’ to say hi if I met her.”

“…”

“Have ya met her? Accordin’ to that Saki guy who was attackin’ ya, ya only just left the Mountain yesterday.”

“Yeah, I took my things here and moved into the dorm yesterday.”

Unable to look Taeko in the eye, Shoui looked down.

“And I haven’t met her yet. I haven’t contacted Nandaimon either.”

“Why not? Because I beat ya and become Chancellor?”

“Well…”

“Or because yer precious Koto Chancellor killed my brother? With that flash freezin’?”

“That was-…!”

Shoui looked up and started to say something, but Taeko smiled and patted his shoulder.

“Let’s just leave it at that.”

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Persuasion – Hit.

“I’m glad even a guy like you would try not to hurt my feelings.”

“I feel like you keep insulting me here…”

“Don’t worry about it. Now, how about ya go visit Nandaimon Shrine?”

“I plan to eventually…”

—Taeko – Boxing Tech –Take – Headlock – Hit.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow!”

“What’s this ‘eventually’ nonsense? If ya don’t get goin’ right away, I’ll bully ya. I heard what ya really think back at the Mountain. I forced it out of ya, remember?”

“Yeah, that Boston crab was no laughing matter… But that’s not the-ow ow! M-my brains are gonna come out!”

—Shoui – Gym/Dodge Tech – Multiple Counter-Take – Escape – Hit.

“Ahh, I think you changed the shape of my head.”

“It’s what ya get for not pullin’ yourself together.”

Taeko tapped his shoulder with the thumb of her false arm.

“I got this Eighth Dragon Emperor after our fight, but am I any different than I was before? Even the Koto Chancellor is-…”

“But Yuuki is different.”

“How?”

“She…”

“Because she killed someone?”

Taeko let out a deep sigh.

“Then ya should become a Chancellor, too. Then ya’d get permission to kill. And when it comes to the Koto Chancellor…well, I can see how yer thoughts get the better of ya.”

“But I don’t have my own Words. …And I let other people influence me too much. Like with that 1st Special Duty Officer.”

“Ya’ll find yer words somewhere eventually. Mine only came to me durin’ our fight…and they were the same as my brother’s. More importantly,” she added. “Lecutrin’ ya here isn’t gonna help, so just go meet her.”

“You’re probably right. …Then for now, how about we get something to eat? Where do you want to go?”

“Ya moron. I can’t do anything if ya don’t lead the way.”

“Do you not know your way around Osaka?”

She shook her head, so Shoui accepted it.

“Then let’s walk around and find a dote-yaki place or something. They have large counters.”

As soon as he made that suggestion, he saw a light.

A bolt of lightning fell on Osaka.

“!?”

When they heard the deep, tearing Live rumbling around them, Shoui and Taeko turned to the west.

An electrical discharge filled the sky over the Yodo ward.

“Winter lighting? That sure was flashy.”

“No! That wasn’t lightning!”

Shoui took a few steps forward.

“!? Shoui!”

He did not turn back toward Taeko’s voice.

—Shoui – Army Tech – Take – Projectile Recognition – Hit!

“What’s the matter!?”

Taeko ran up behind him, but he still did not turn her way.

He focused on a single point in the sky and spoke.

“I’ve seen this once before. That wasn’t lightning. It was ether being loaded from Suzaku Ver. 40!”

“Suzaku Ver. 40? You mean that combat satellite!?”

“Yes. Since they can’t use an orbital Word Particle Cannon in urban areas, Nandaimon has Suzaku Ver. 40 provide the ether that powers holy spells.”

“Um, so that means…what?”

“That light would only fall toward the person who can directly contact Suzaku Ver. 40…and that means Yuuki.”

Shoui slowly walked forward.

“Shoui!?”

When Taeko called after him, he reflexively broke into a run.

“Ya moron! Is that what ya do after worrying someone!?”

His shoulders tensed at her voice.

A sort of fascination filled his gut.

On that night two years before, the injury to his forehead had caused him to pass out for a few moments. By the time he had woken, her opponent had already been dead.

Not even a single drop of blood had stained the ground and only Yamashita Gihei’s right arm had remained.

With blood staining half his face, he had supported her as she nearly collapsed and he had called for Senga in the blowing wind of Sarusawa Lake.

Two years had passed since Senga had determined Yamashita had died of “disintegration” due to an impact after being flash frozen.

The hands that had embraced her back then were now tightly clenched as he ran forward.

Saki Seiji had called her Killing Holder.

Even back then, she had not showed her emotions much, so it may have been an appropriate name for her.

…Are you still the girl I know?

He hid that question in his heart and ran forward to find the answer.

He ran to meet her.

Part 3

7:35 PM

The wind blew.

Osaka had plenty of geographical ups and downs, so the wind would weave through those lower areas.

One such path for the wind followed the Yodo River as it cut through the city east to west.

The wind picked up the scent of the river as it blew along it.

This time of year, it was the scent of a winter river.

The scent of the dried grass along the bank was stronger than that of the water.

It was a dry scent.

A hint of iron was mixed in with the wind.

It was a rusty smell.

The dry wind held that iron fragrance as it blew along the bank of the river.

Shoui and Taeko broke through that wind as they ran.

They soon realized the source of the iron scent in the wind: blood.

"…!?"

They did not even need to confirm it with a Tech.

After smelling it several times in their training at the Mountain, it had permeated their bodies.

Police and ambulance sirens blared in the distant center of the city as if to prove their sense of smell was not deceiving them.

"…Yuuki."

"Does it bother ya? Ya've been hesitatin' all this time."

"I'm still hesitating a hell of a lot right now."

"Do ya take anythin' seriously?"

"A cool guy doesn't let anyone see how he really feels."

"Ya moron. …Why are ya so obsessed with protectin' girls?"

"That's simple," answered Shoui. "Because it's cool."

“Do ya want the Koto Chancellor to accept you?”

He did not answer that question.

He picked up speed and saw their destination up ahead.

A school had a wall around it by the riverside and he saw definite destruction there.

The large schoolyard of Private Showa Academy, which was known for both its academics and combat training, was utterly destroyed, one school building included.

One of the southern school buildings had a large hole torn in the front as if a giant mouth had bitten into it.

And the two hundred square meter schoolyard had a large mortar-like hole covering it.

…Did Yuuki do this?

He ran down the straight bank with that question in his heart.

“Hey! Shoui! Wait up!”

He ignored her.

He ran from the bank to the asphalt road of the city.

In five seconds, he was running through the residential area near the school.

He could see the wall surrounding the school and several vehicles were parked in front of that concrete wall.

"…"

There was a crowd near the main gate.

That was the only bright area, so he could not see past the wall.

He ran closer.

He did not hesitate to cross the road and to jump on top of one of the cars parked in front of the wall separating the school from the city.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing!?"

He ignored someone's shout and kept moving.

He used the car's roof to jump toward the wall which was at least five meters tall.

—Shoui – Gym Tech – Take – Great Leap – Hit!

The boys' body flew through the darkness.

He flipped through the air to cross the wall in a single breath.

The wind carried an even stronger iron smell now.

By the time he sensed that, he had already entered Private Showa's grounds.

—Shoui – Gym/Savate Tech – Multiple Take – Super Landing – Hit.

He twisted his outstretched body to silently land on the schoolyard and then he looked around.

"…"

The large schoolyard was in an even more unusual state than it had looked from afar.

It had been torn into along with the school building and it had transformed into a sea of red sand.

The red came from the clay laid out over the schoolyard, but…

"Why is there sand here?"

He touched the thin coat of red sand covering the ground and found it was cold.

It was even chillier than the winter air.

…What is going on?

"It's called an intense freeze drying. This entire space was instantly frozen to get rid of all the moisture until it completely disintegrated. It's the same technique used to kill former Nagoya Vice Chancellor Yamashita Gihei."

"Saki-san?"

Saki Seiji, the boy he had met just that evening, stood in front of Shoui.

He looked to Shoui while wearing the student combat coat that was essentially the official uniform of Osaka's Chancellor's Officers.

"But what was that jump you just made? It was a hell of a lot better than the one you showed me before."

"Oh, hi there. Good evening. Um, where's Yuuki?"

“Hey, do you have a habit of ignoring people or something?”

“I don’t have my own Words, so I don’t want to let in any extraneous voices.”

Saki clicked his tongue at Shoui’s joking answer.

“I should’ve dealt with you before Souichirou showed up back there.”

“C’mon, calm down.”

—Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Search for Individual – Miss.

He could not find the person he was looking for.

The only people there were the Tuners and Busters carrying Devices on the schoolyard and in the school building.

They were apparently starting to fix the damage with Tuning, so cats and birds would occasionally appear near them.

“…This is horrifying.”

Saki responded to his absentminded comment.

“What? You were taken in by Nandaimon, so didn’t you see stuff like this on a daily basis?”

“It was a long time ago when I saw Suzaku Ver. 40 activate. …So Yuuki did that?”

“Yeah, the Koto Chancellor can apparently use the transmitter installed in Phoenix, her false eye, to really let her opponent have it.”

“Her false eye?”

“The Killing Holder’s vermilion eye. It’s just like Nandaimon to go with the vermilion of the Suzaku.”

Shoui sighed at the boy’s explanation.

“I can’t believe this,” he muttered before pulling his bandanna over his eyes.

“But why are you here?” asked Saki. “Did you really come here to meet the Koto Chancellor?”

“Yes, I did. What about it?”

—Saki – Boxing Tech – Counter-Take – Strike – Hit.

—Shoui – Dodge Tech – Take – Swayback – Hit.

“Wow, that was close. What was that for, Saki-san?”

“So you dodged it. I tried to catch you off guard, but mine got the counter judgement.”

“Of course I dodged that. …You’re kind of scary, you know that? I bet you don’t have many friends.”

“Shut up. And get lost. I’m in charge of dealing with this incident, so it pisses me off when someone comes wandering onto the scene.”

“I see. That must be tough. But what do you mean by ‘this incident’?”

“Apparently, the Nandaimon girl took out one of the idiots here at Private Showa, so they wanted revenge.”

Shoui looked around the schoolyard again.

“Girls sure are scary when they’re mad.”

“These things are normally done with a duel between representatives, but Private Showa must have thought they could overpower her with numbers. It only lasted an instant and you can see how it turned out. There were thirty-two serious injuries and five minor injuries, so this is no laughing matter.”

“Where are the injured?”

“They were already taken away in ambulances. Tuners are treating the worst ones in the emergency ward over there. We’re not talking about a landmine race at an athletics festival here.”

At that point, Saki glared at Shoui.

“You aren’t going to follow me to the hospital too, are you?”

“Again! Why are you so suspicious of me?”

“What? My intuition, of course.”

“I appreciate the nonscientific reasoning. Now, um, do you know where Yuuki is?”

“You really don’t listen to people, do you?” Saki sighed. “Besides, what are you even gonna do if you meet the Koto Chancellor?”

“Grab her butt or fondle her breasts.”

“Eh? …What was that?”

“Oh, um, just speaking to myself. It’s been two years since we’ve done anything like that after all.”

“Two years since doing anything like what? Was it just me or did you say something pretty weird just-…”

Saki was cut off by a girl’s voice.

“Hey! Outta the way!”

Part 4

7:37 PM

The voice came from overhead.

Shoui recognized the voice, so he took immediate action.

—Shoui – Gym/Dodge Tech – Multiple Counter-Take – Leaping Dodge – Hit!

But Saki…

“What?”

Taking time to look up proved unwise.

A giant false arm and a girl were falling toward him.

“!”

And they landed on him.

The impact sounded a lot like metal striking flesh.

—Taeko – Gym Tech – Take – Balance – Hit!

Immediately after punching Saki to the ground like a cushion, Taeko performed a cartwheel and ended up on her feet next to where Saki lay on the ground.

“That was a close one! Hey, boy! Ya alive?”

Saki did not respond, so Shoui did so in his stead.

“Hm, I think he might be a goner.”

“Oh, ya think so too? …I tried to copy ya, but it didn’t turn out too good.”

“You lost your balance due to that heavy Dragon Emperor, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Wah ha ha ha ha!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!”

“Wah ha ha ha ha!”

“What do you think you’re laughing about, you morons!?”

Saki jumped to his feet and pointed at Taeko.

“You bitch! Don’t think I’ll hold back just cause you’re the Nagoya Chancellor!”

As he shouted at her, a trail of blood flowed from his hair and down his forehead.

The number of flowing red lines quickly grew and covered his entire face.

“Ohhhhh! I’m bleeding!”

“This guy sure is noisy. Is he really one of Osaka’s Special Duty Officers?”

“He has been pretty bloody and noisy, but he really is. Right, Saki-san?”

“Don’t give me that ‘Right, Saki-san?’ nonsense! Anyway, why are you here, Nagoya Chancellor!?”

Still shouting with blood flowing down his face, Saki glared at Taeko and Shoui before looking around the area.

Shoui followed his gaze and found a lot of people looking their way: the Tuners who were repairing the schoolyard, the police officers investigating the scene, and the many students.

“Oh, look. I’m the center of attention. I’m so cool.”

“Shut up! …Hey! Quit letting us distract you and get back to work! You want me to punch you!?”

Saki’s angry voice set everyone in motion again and Shoui nodded.

“That looks just like the townsfolk obeying their ruler’s reign of terror.”

“Do you *want* me to kill you?”

“Ya like saying scary things, don’t ya? Don’t tell me ya actually think ya can beat Shoui.”

Saki Seiji wiped the blood from his forehead and answered Taeko.

“A member of the Chancellor’s Officers would never lose to an amateur. But more importantly…”

“More importantly? …What is it?”

“Why are you even here, Nagoya Chancellor?”

“Explainin’ that would take a while.”

“Keep it short.”

“I felt like it.”

“What do you mean you ‘felt like it’, you utter moron!?”

“Oh, shut up. I just followed Shoui.”

“And that made you crash into me? …Are you really Nagoya’s Chancellor? You take everything you do too lightly!”

“Lookin’ for opportunities and changin’ yerself when they come along is the heart of Nagoya. ….The Nagoya Chancellor needs to be able to do what she wants and keep tabs on what’s goin’ on.”

As soon as she narrowed her eyes and smiled, Taeko suddenly grabbed Saki’s chin with her Dragon Emperor hand.

“Now, it’s my turn to ask. …Where is the Koto Chancellor?”

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Coerce – Hit!

Saki frowned and answered.

“You can’t see her? She’s sitting perfectly still right over there!”

He used his chin to gesture toward a cherry tree to the left.

The tree had split down the center due to the localized low temperature that had hit the school.

There was a glimpse of red in the shadow of the split trunk.

Shoui observed that fluttering red cloth hidden by the color of the tree.

—Shoui – School Tech – Take – Uniform Recognition – Hit…

There was no mistaking it.

It was the uniform of Nandaimon Academy's main school.

That was the girl's school attended by Koto Chancellor and Koto Guardian Yuuki Yuuki.

The color moved.

The girl taking a break in the shadow of the broken and split tree trunk stood up.

The moving colors were the black and red of her uniform, the white of her blouse, and the pitch black of the hair that fell all the way to the back of her knees.

He saw her face look back his way.

"…"

In that instant, he saw the two years he had missed.

Yuuki had always had a mature look to her face, but in the past two years, she had grown to adulthood on the inside and transformed from being a girl to being a woman.

Her expression and movements contained a sharp, quick, cold, sleek, and powerful strength.

As if to confirm and smile at his surprise, her right eye glowed somewhat vermilion.

That false eye was known as the Phoenix, an alternative name for the Suzaku.

That eye of the vermilion bird faced motionlessly forward as if to more easily communicate with its main form floating in the heavens.

In contrast, her left eye slowly moved toward Shoui's group.

—Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Sense Gaze – Miss.

Shoui could not tell if Yuuki's eye was looking only at him or not.

Meanwhile, she began walking around the fallen tree.

She moved toward Shoui's group.

"Here she comes, Shoui. This is what ya wanted."

Shoui responded to Taeko with several forced nods.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you supposed to say when seeing someone again like this?"

"When it's been a while since ya've seen them, ya should probably say 'fancy seein' you here' or something."

"You moron," said Saki. "Don't pretend this is some kind of coincidence. And when you meet someone again after a long time, you need to greet them with a smile to calm their heart! That's the Osaka way! …Ow! Don't grab me with that metal arm, you bitch!"

"Quit movin' around and stay quiet. …Here she comes, Shoui."

“Eh? Oh, right, um… Well, it’s true I should probably smile.”

Shoui turned around and found Yuuki there.

She was within arm’s reach now.

The past two years seemed concentrated into the spot at which she stood.

He wanted to say something but was not quite sure what.

“…”

After a few moments of silence, he raised his head and looked her in the eye.

It was too late now to say “fancy seeing you here”, so he causally raised a hand and did his best to sound cheerful.

“Hi, chancy seeing you here!”

Yuuki gave a short greeting in response.

It was only two words long.

“Get lost.”

Chapter 3: A New Movement (Character Introduction)

Part 1

11:02 PM

The winter night was growing late and a sandy wind passed below the moonlight.

That wind blew above the desert known as the Altered Line that covered northern Nagoya.

It danced freely through the sky.

A large bridge crossed the sky as if following the wind.

The long, straight bridge was located several kilometers above the ground.

The giant bridge cast its shadow on the vast sea of sand below and it had a certain name: New Route 155.

The ultra elevated bridge crossed the region of desert covering northern Nagoya.

The moon had risen directly above New Route 155.

The elevated bridge cast its shadow in that moonlight and a four-track freight railroad traveled east to west across it.

Currently, two men faced each other on the track leading to the Nagoya region.

Standing on the west was a large boy with two false arms and a sleeveless school uniform.

Standing on the east was a boy with short-cut hair and a red mountain hoodie.

They were both students.

They both had their legs spread wide across the railroad track.

A powerful silence ruled the region.

Tension itself seemed to float around them.

Something like uncontainable murderous intent surrounded the area with a low Tempo.

That Tempo could only be broken by new words and the first to open his mouth was the large boy.

“To think you would use 155 to try to sneak into the Nagoya region.”

His low voice elicited a confident bend of the eyebrows and a bitter smile from the other boy.

“If we hadn’t been questioned at Inuyama Station, we could have gotten through without having to pass over the Altered Line. I didn’t think they would bother with an inspection for a night train.”

“I had heard Inuyama was caught in a battle …Supposedly, they were faced with a giant wolf-like beast and someone immune to all attacks.”

“We’re all pretty much demons, so you all don’t stand a chance. …Nagoya got the short end of the stick on this one.”

“Nonsense. …Ever since the Kinki Riot, Nagoya has never met anything we could not eliminate at this east-west gate.”

“So you take a neutral stance in combat? Interesting. Now, I know your Vice Chancellor from two years ago tried to side with Tokyo, but I hear he was killed by the Koto Chancellor. So which side will you choose now?”

The large boy responded by holding his false hands forward.

“I would prefer to know what *you’re* thinking, Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide.”

“Oh? I’d thought student information on the east wasn’t getting to the west and vice versa, but it looks like I’m more famous than I thought.”

“Nagoya stands at the center between east and west. The information reaches us.” He continued. “We know that you won East Japan’s Student Karate Openweight Championship despite being a middleweight with no prosthetics and not using a Rhythm. And that you are a problem student who has not once appeared as East Japan’s representative for the thrice a year World Student Conference.”

“Ha ha. That’s how you see me? Damn, I’m cool.”

“What are you thinking? You may be a problem student, but you are still Tokyo’s Chancellor. Why would the representative of East Japan break the world-regulated school rules by traveling west?”

“That’s simple. My sister is calling me.”

"…Your sister?"

"That's right. My sister said goodbye during the Kinki Riot thirteen years ago." He took a breath. "And my final connection to her is in that city."

He resumed a forward-and-back stride while raising his arms in preparation.

He spread his right hand, looked at the silver ring on the middle finger, and asked a question.

"I know all about you too. You're the winner of West Japan's Student Karate Openweight Championship and you're Nagoya Vice Chancellor. You're Ichiyama Yuusei the Zapper, aren't you?"

"…So we are about to determine who is Japan's greatest student karate fighter, are we?"

"The greatest student karate fighter? That's not what this is about."

"?"

"The fight I am about to begin is the war to become king."

Hisahide began to sing.

A red flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in strength

A human heart flows into nothingness

A soldier saves the king

A woman becomes the queen

A sage reminisces

Run down another's path without looking

Choose your own path and sprint

The true path lies in the future

Despite the song, he showed no hint of using a Rhythm's power.

“Was that song not the Words needed to use a Rhythm?” asked Ichiyama.

“For now, it’s nothing but a prophecy.”

“A prophecy?”

“When I do use that song as my Words, then I will become king, just as the lyrics say.”

He took a breath.

“I will become a king who can only choose the future.”

His fantastical words brought a brief frown to Ichiyama’s face.

A moment later, Hisahide began to run forward.

“You aren’t blocking my way!”

With that shout, he won the initiative.

Part 2

11:06 PM

Ichiyama Yuusei was calm.

He successfully used several reactive Techs that did not require initiative.

—Ichiyama – Steel Tech – Take – Activate False Eye “Akashi” – Hit.

—Ichiyama – Steel Tech – Take – Activate Reinforced Organs – Hit.

—Ichiyama – Steel Tech – Take – Cut Prosthetics Limiter – Hit.

—Ichiyama – Steel Tech – Take – Activate Internal Rhythm "Explosion High" – Hit.

By the time Hisahide got close, the steam of activation blew from both false arms.

The power of Ishiyama's false eyes allowed him to ignore the darkness of the night.

Losing the initiative was the only way he was at any disadvantage.

Hisahide quickly reached him and threw a kick.

"!"

He rotated his compactly bent knee. Rather than a karate roundhouse kick, this kick focused on speed and aim as in Muay Thai.

But…

…There's nothing much of note. Is he testing me?

Ichiyama had faced countless people with kicks at this level.

—Ichiyama – Dodge Tech – Take – Sway Back – Hit.

After confirming that his opponent was neatly rotating on the heel of his pivot leg, he bent his upper body back to escape the path of the kick.

Or he should have.

"!?"

The strike from the armored hit pointer attached to Hisahide's white sneakers scored a solid blow on the side of Ichiyama's broad jaw.

With a dull sound of impact, Ichiyama's large body floated up into the air.

…What just happened!?

He had successfully dodged with his Tech.

…So why did the kick still hit me?

—Ichiyama – Gym Tech – Take – Stabilize – Hit!

Using a sway back to dodge had been a stroke of good luck. If he had ducked, he would have been hit by a counter.

The kick had been stronger than it looked.

—Ichiyama – Steel Tech – Take – Control False Eye "Akashi" – Miss.

The impact had removed the effects of his false eyes.

With the power of Akashi gone, Hisahide had suddenly become a mere silhouette as he rushed further forward.

Ichiyama was at a disadvantage.

However, he did not rely on the power of his false eyes. He instead worked to solve the mystery of how his opponent had broken his Dodge Tech.

…It would be dangerous not to take this seriously.

With a metallic flavor in his mouth, he sang his Words.

In the cold, still air

The force that disturbs the field via destruction

Is born of a grand power

That song caused his arms to explode.

This was the Explosion High Rhythm.

A series of explosions resided in the fists of his false arms.

The ether floating in the air was not transformed into gunpowder or fuel. It was transformed into pure impacts and explosions.

A roar came from each fist.

The destructive power of an impact from them was at its highest level.

If his opponent blocked, their arm would be blown off and a solid hit would blow them away altogether.

—Ichiyama – Explosion High/Boxing Tech – Multiple Take – Consecutive Attacks – Hit.

"…!"

The pistons of his false arms began to run, giving him complete control over both straight and curved motions.

With the limiters cut and with the reinforced organs contained within his body to endure the extreme movement, he could pull off a barrage of twelve hits a second.

His Boxing Tech had succeeded, so if Hisahide's Dodge Tech failed…

“Is that all you’ve got?”

Nakamura Hisahide did not even use a Tech.

He simply danced into Ichiyama’s storm of fists as if nothing was happening at all.

…Is he insane!?

Despite Ichiyama’s question, his fists never hit his opponent.

Hisahide avoided all of the attacks as if bending his body in a dance.

He bent forward, right, left, forward, and back.

Even as the bottom of his mountain hoodie was torn by the explosions, he slowly walked forward.

There was no hint of excitement or worry on his face.

Even a grazing hit from the Explosion High Rhythm would blow someone away, so people were normally filled with fear.

The Explosion High Rhythm briefly slowed, so Ichiyama frantically opened his mouth to send the Rhythm’s Message to his body.

But…

“That’s not going to help.”

With those words, Hisahide arrived right in front of Ichiyama.

His clothing was torn up, but he himself was completely unharmed.

Ichiyama came to a stop when he saw it, but Hisahide took action.

While standing right in front of Ichiyama, he thrust his knee up to chest height and threw a kick.

His lower leg drew a swift sideways arc and his toes flew toward Ichiyama's jaw.

This kick required great flexibility.

…!

A belated chill ran down Ichiyama's spine.

His response was entirely powered by instinct.

He tried to block the kick from below using his Explosion High fist.

—Ichiyama – Dodge/Boxing Tech – Take – Block – Hit!

Instead of dodging, he defended. He would take a good bit of damage, but the technique was guaranteed to succeed unless his opponent's attack failed. After all, he was using the Explosion High Rhythm.

Hisahide would not escape this unscathed.

However, that assumption was completely overturned when the kick struck his jaw from directly below.

"…Gh!?"

He did not understand.

He had never heard of an attack that could slip past an absolute defense.

…What's going on?

He truly did not understand, but he did know two things: First, he was collapsing backwards.

"Seaaaaaaaahhhh!"

And second, Hisahide's right heel was swinging down toward his face like a battle axe.

His consciousness cut out almost immediately.

Part 3

11:10 PM

Kasumi Ryuuichi was 1st Special Duty Officer of Nagoya's Chancellor's Officers and his primary duty was to relay intelligence.

But at the moment, he had abandoned that duty to instead face an opponent on a bridge passing through the mountains.

The moonlight seemed to drip down on top of Kasumi as he faced an opponent who wore a white blouson, jeans, and a shirt around their waist for defense.

Kasumi focused on the somewhat androgynous face of this opponent who held a long hexagonal rod.

…A girl?

He nodded and looked around the area.

He saw the moonlit mountains and river. This was the Kagamihara Mountain Range located between Nagoya and Gifu.

He had been trying to carry his intelligence to the Kansai region while avoiding the intense fighting on New Route 155 which would have taken him from Inuyama Station to the Nagoya region.

…The West Japan Chancellors are holding a meeting about Ixolde in Kansai.

He had intended to escape and use a direct line of communication in Gifu, but the enemy had caught up.

Speed was his main selling point as 1st Special Duty Officer, but someone had caught up from behind.

"…"

He pulled a memo pad from the attaché case he held under one arm and placed it in his pocket. That memo pad was special made in the Mountain and carried by any 1st Special Duty Officer. It contained the information left behind by the previous holders of that position.

…I can't let it fall into enemy hands.

The attaché case would only be a burden during a fight, so he threw it down on the road.

He took a deep breath, pulled headphones from his pocket, and switched the MD on.

He raised the volume to an Octave of 160,000 and sent his main weapons from his sleeve and into his hands. They were dart knives.

He held one, two, three, and then four between the fingers of both hands.

—Kasumi – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Listen – Hit.

He heard a freight train.

"…"

It was probably transporting lime or something.

But he did not panic.

Only one track crossed this bridge.

That straight-line layout was ideal for a knife-thrower like him.

He prepared to throw and waited for his opponent to make their move.

He gently tensed his body with his hips lowered.

Before throwing, he would gather strength in his entire body rather than just his arms, so he needed to release that tension like a spring.

His hands sank into the opposite pockets and his eyes focused on his opponent.

That opponent gave him a disinterested look with the hexagonal rod sill in her right hand.

Then her lips moved to form a question.

"Out of respect to a fellow warrior, I will ask your name."

"…And if I don't tell you?"

"You will be a loser who I don't even bother remembering. That's all."

"And If I win? What then?"

"Don't worry. You'll lose."

With that cheerful answer, she gave a jerk of her chin to demand he answer.

Kasumi smiled bitterly as he complied.

“Nagoya 1st Special Duty Officer Kasumi Ryuuichi. My Dance Combat is the Secret Five Families Style.”

She nodded and responded in kind.

“Tokyo Vice Chancellor Aoi Hijiri. My Dance Combat is the Shinkage Style.”

Kasumi frowned at the region she mentioned.

“Tokyo!? Are you invading Kantou!?”

“Does it matter? For this fight anyway? More importantly…”

“More importantly?”

“I have two questions. To start with…have you ever been to Osaka?”

“?”

“I’ve heard there are cherry trees that bloom even in winter there. I’m searching for them.”

“Someone from Tokyo is interested in Osaka’s cherry blossoms?”

“If you don’t know, that’s fine.” She took a breath. “My other question is about Osaka’s Chancellor who uses the Modified Purple Electricity Style which includes the Kage Style. …How strong is he?”

“Haven’t you heard he defeated an ogre that appeared in Osaka two years ago?”

“An ogre, hm?”

Her response was terribly calm.

To make sure Kasumi did not have a chance to attack, she remained in her combat stance as she sighed.

…Cherry trees that bloom in winter and Osaka’s Chancellor? There’s something more to this Vice Chancellor of Zenon City Tokyo.

Kasumi’s thoughts were cut off by the sound of the freight train.

It had grown a lot louder, it came from behind him, and it was surprisingly close by.

“I need to get this intelligence through no matter what.”

With that, the back of his tensed body swelled out.

He stopped breathing and everything else stopped too.

Then, it all suddenly exploded.

“Seaaaahhh!”

His left hand shot up.

It moved too quickly for the average person to see.

—Kasumi – Draw Tech –Take – Rapid Throw – Hit!

Four silver lines raced through the air.

He was aiming below the enemy's collarbone, below her chest, at her hip, and at her thigh. The locations drew a vertical line down her right half.

Aoi Hijiri responded with a vertical swing of the hexagonal rod in her right hand.

As the metal rod covered her vitals, four knives stabbed into it up to the hilt.

The four nearly identical sounds seemed to pierce straight through Kasumi and brought a chill to his skin.

Aoi started forward after catching the knives, but that was when Kasumi's right arm shot upwards.

"It's still my phase!"

As he pulled his right hand from his left pocket, it was wrapped in ether light.

He was adding in his Rhythm.

—Kasumi – Draw Tech – Take – Rapid Throw – Hit!

The knives were wrapped in ether light this time.

They were aimed at Aoi's left side, making it a mirror image of the previous attack.

Her right hand had stopped after the previous movement and she could not yet move again thanks to the impact and weight of the knives remaining in the hexagonal rod.

"…"

Instead, she moved her left hand.

To Kasumi, it looked like she turned diagonally and held her left arm at her waist.

He smiled a little.

…Don't think you can dodge my attack by turning to the side.

With that thought, he recited his Words.

He jumped straight to the climax.

Beyond the farthest reaches of time

Beyond the most distant lands

Where power becomes a harmony of destruction

—Kasumi – Explosion High/Mind Tech – Multiple-Take – Remote Control – Hit!

The ether wrapped around the back of the four knives became explosions.

A quartet of bursting sounds followed

The path of the four silver lines changed like ricocheting bullets.

But their angle was not all that changed. Their speed also increased considerably.

They had been given the kinetic energy of both the throw and the explosions.

Aoi's expression changed.

She could not follow the changed path of the knives with her eyes.

One flew toward her throat, two toward her right chest, and one toward her solar plexus.

Even if both her arms were metal prosthetics, she could not fully cover that complex intersection of attacks.

…*There's nothing she can do!*

But her left arm demonstrated its opposition to that thought.

That arm was much slower than the flying knives, but a portion of it still brushed against the four knives as it made a flowing forward motion.

That settled it all.

The four knives fell to the ground.

Part 4

11:14 PM

Kasumi watched in a daze.

He understood what had happened.

He had seen it with his own eyes.

First, Aoi's left hand had shot forward while drawing an outward-facing spiral.

At the end of the jab, her palm was facing upwards.

By then, the knives should have reached her body, but they had changed direction again.

They seemed to have been swallowed up by the spiraling motion of her left arm. They were like branches caught in whirlpool. It had only lasted an instant, but they had clearly swam along with the motion of her left hand and then been deflected.

He could see a large outward-facing wrinkle in the left sleeve of her blouson.

He did not know what kind of power it was or even if it came from within or without, but a great power had created a current there to apply a twist to the straight movement of the knives.

…*What was that?*

A simple touch had caused the blades to fall despite each one flying in from a different direction.

She was entirely unharmed.

…*What was that!?*

No one answered his question.

Meanwhile, Aoi silently spun the hexagonal rod in her right hand.

She pointed the grip toward Kasumi so the knives stabbed into it were closer to her.

She grabbed the hilt of the topmost knife and slowly pulled it out.

With a sound that brought a chill to his teeth and she held the knife's long hilt in her slender fingers.

Ether light glowed in her hand and her lips parted.

She produced upbeat drum and bass Words.

Beyond the farthest reaches of time

Beyond the most distant lands

Where power becomes a harmony of destruction

That was Kasumi's song.

She did not have an MD. She simply uttered the Words from her own mouth.

"!?"

She ignored his confusion.

—Aoi – Draw Tech – Take – Rapid Throw – Hit!

The knife moved swiftly but horribly silently.

Its speed as it flew straight toward his chest filled him with vivid fear.

"…!"

—Kasumi – Mind Tech – Take – Emotional Control – Miss!

—Kasumi – Gym/Dodge Tech – Multiple Take – Leaping Dodge – Hit!

As soon as he took a large jump backwards, Aoi jabbed her metal rod into the railroad crossing the bridge.

A solid sound rang out.

—Aoi – Explosion High –Take – Remote Control – Hit!

An explosion suddenly appeared on the back of the knife and it ricocheted.

"!?"

Before Kasumi could feel surprise, the knife stabbed into his left leg.

It plunged deep into the limb.

"…Wha-!?"

His voice of question was accompanied by pain racing through his brain.

She had definitely used his techniques and Words.

The force of the throw, that way of using the Explosion High, the intensity of the blast, and the Words that should only have belonged to him were no different from what he had used.

…What is going on!?

"You deflected all my attacks…and copied them…?"

The answer to his question contained an overwhelming meaning.

"I surpass you."

He tried to oppose her words, but his voice of protest would not come.

Instead, the pain from the knife in his leg brought a scream.

And that voice was answered by a steam whistle behind him.

A mechanical roar and artificial light washed over him from behind.

The freight train was rushing toward his back as he crouched at the edge of the bridge.

The tracks shook and let out a metallic groan to tell him of the great weight approaching.

With his leg injured, he had no way of avoiding the train.

"…!"

He gasped.

"Do I really have to go to the trouble?"

With that question, he heard Aoi sigh right by his ear.

…!?

By the time he saw her graceful face in front of him, she had already grabbed his collar.

"What are you doing!?" he asked in utter fear.

"The loser doesn't get to speak."

With that, she threw him into the river below.

…!

A cry of terror and surprise escaped his throat.

As he flew through the air, the metal bumper of the freight train's first car grazed his feet.

That first car continued on and passed through the position Aoi had stood in.

It had hit her.

He could not imagine any other outcome, yet he was confident that girl who claimed to be Tokyo's Vice Chancellor had not been hit.

A beat later, he fell into the winter river and broke through the surface.

He sank deep into the chilly water.

Part 5

11:17 PM

A new figure appeared on New Route 155 where the Tokyo Chancellor and Nagoya Vice Chancellor had fought. Five minutes had passed since the fight ended.

A tall, skinny boy in a first-class three-piece suit took long strides to catch up to the boy in a red mountain hoodie.

The long scarf draped over his shoulders blew in the night wind as he spoke.

"Nagoya's Vice Chancellor was on the ground back there. Did you kill him?"

Hisahide shrugged and shook his head at the sharp question.

"It isn't easy with just my hands and feet. I can't pull off a one-hit kill."

“That is the weakness of White Noise. Although that talent does allow you to use silence to ignore Techs and Rhythms that are programmed using the flow of Lives.”

He pulled rectangular glasses from his suit’s breast pocket and placed them on his nose.

“I doubt Nagoya thought someone like that could actually exist. According to legend, I believe the last Harmonist existed thirteen years ago.”

“As the Kinki Riot continued to intensify over the course of a year, two Chancellors personally brought it to an end: Osaka Chancellor Kuki Udai and Tokyo Chancellor-…”

“And the only one who can follow in their footsteps is you, Nakamura Hisahide.”

When the tall boy interrupted, Hisahide nodded, smiled bitterly, and looked at the silver ring on his right hand.

“And yet I used to be called worse than a Dis-Worder because I couldn’t use Techs or Rhythms.”

“Yes, even a one-in-a-million Dis-Worder can apparently use Over Rhythms and Techs.”

“It’s like the Ugly Duckling. After all, that turned out to be a shortcut to being the strongest.”

“…The strongest, hm? To think the key to unifying east and west was strength.”

The boy stroked the scarf that floated around him like the legendary hagoromo of a tennin and Hisahide smiled bitterly.

“Ikemaru, where’s Aoi?”

“She is apparently dealing with a runner. She will meet up with us in Nagoya.”

“Hold on. So she isn’t with Takada?”

Ikemaru quietly nodded.

“Even if she is my cousin, it is not my job to look over that Dog God user.”

“So you ran on up here, leaving my future wife all on her own?”

“I did not run. I walked.”

Ikemaru ignored Hisahide’s bitter look as he continued.

“Besides, I doubt Takada Seigi of all people would want anything to do with you. She did give you a prophecy, though.”

“A prophecy, huh?” Hisahide nodded. “Have we finished all the preparations to make me king?”

Ikemaru used a hand wearing black leather gloves to pull two pieces of paper from his pocket.

They were charms.

“As Ikemaru Takahiro, future representative of the Ikemaru family, I have sealed two powerful kotodama. One is for Ixolde and the other…well, it will likely help you on your way back to Nagoya.”

“You couldn’t make it three?”

“I am traveling with you as an inspector, but helping that girl find what she is looking for matters more to me. …But don’t worry. You could even call the words inside these ‘excessive’.”

“So we have the two charms. That leaves an underground map and information on Ixolde. The former we can swipe from a government office, but what about the latter? The HQ for Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers?”

“Most likely. And on the personnel front, Master Iba will be joining us later.”

“Now I’m worried. That old man should have no trouble getting into Osaka. But the person we really need here is Takada, so where is she? I haven’t seen her since you blew away the station’s roof back there.”

“The Dog God will protect her. I assume she’s helping heal the injured. I can hardly believe the way she thinks sometimes.”

“That’s because she’s pure. Unlike you.” Hisahide gave a deep sigh. “This has been a long story, but getting to Nagoya is something like the halfway point.”

“Who knows what would have happened if you hadn’t met Master Iba at the Mountain.”

“Three years ago, huh? Ikemaru, what were you doing back then?”

“Facing the death of that girl’s mother.”

“Don’t say that so casually. Aoi wouldn’t want that, would she?”

Hisahide turned around and started walking down New Route 155.

He resumed his journey to Nagoya.

“Let’s go, Ikemaru. We don’t need anything else in Nagoya. If possible, I want to regroup with Takada and Aoi there…and then we make our attack on Osaka.”

“You’re really doing it? You’re going to make yourself king? You’re going to crush Osaka as they build something as ridiculous as Ixolde?”

Hisahide answered with a nod and simply stated his own personal theory.

“There only needs to be one king.”

Chapter 4: Battlefield Arrangements (Screen Layout) - (12/18/1996)

Part 1

11:36 AM

A large enclosed space was visible from a hall surrounded by glass.

The hall stuck out like a ship's bridge and was filled with operating equipment. Beyond the glass was a square pit with one hundred meter sides, rivaling the size of a dock.

This was the operating room for the Ixolde Word Accelerator and it was located below Osaka Prefectural #2's schoolyard.

Shutters had covered the glass the day before, but now a giant mechanical pillar made its presence known as it rose from the darkness.

That pillar that appeared to be connected to a giant container was a Babel Gun.

Instructions from the operating room would fire pure compressed words down from the top of the Babel Gun.

The fired words would accelerate as they collided with the word particles of light inside the acceleration pathway. Upon reaching the turnaround point at the very bottom, the excess heavy word dregs were cast off as the words bounced back up.

Those words were further accelerated by the ricochet effect.

They were gathered inside the ascending acceleration pathway that fired word particles of darkness. Darkness pulled in the words with the same speed as the light.

As the words travelled up the long pathway, the ricochet effect would cause them to scatter, but they were kept together by the double helix Babel Gun positioned near the surface.

The pure Lives had been given acceleration by the double arrangement of light and darkness. As they reflected around the double helix pathway, they gathered together and accelerated more and more. The Babel Gun contained a pocket to record the voice emitted when the words surpassed the speed of time.

“We are after the sound that reaches the voice pocket when the maximum value is reached.”

That comment came from a student in a lab coat standing in front of the large window giving a view of the Babel Gun.

He was speaking to Nanba Souichirou and Saki Seiji who stood in front of him.

Once he finished his explanation, he gave a quick bow and left.

Drawn by his movement, Saki Seiji looked back.

As he and Souichirou remained in front of the window, the students working on the final setup of the operating room were inspecting programs and equipment or running simulations of the final stage.

A large digital clock next to the room’s entrance told Saki it was eleven in the morning.

The large terminal below the clock was the mainframe for connecting directly to Ixolde's core.

Once the activation password was typed into that terminal the following day, Ixolde would boot up.

Some technical terminology and instructions were exchanged, footsteps rushed here and there across the floor, and fingers typed furiously at keyboards.

"…"

Saki faced forward again.

Standing next to him, Souichirou had his one eye focused on the Babel Gun standing tall in the space before them.

Saki scratched his head with the attaché case in his hand.

"So we're finally activating it tomorrow, huh?"

"Yes. …At this point, only Nagoya's Chancellor is taking part, so we must really be hated. I wonder if the others will give their approval if we succeed."

"We have a 100% chance of success here. After all, two years ago-…"

"Do not mention that accident."

Souichirou cut Saki off and looked back with his one eye.

Saki also turned around and saw the work being done by the science club elites selected from different schools.

They were all doing their very best to get Ixolde up and running by the following day.

Saki scratched his head again and spoke up hesitantly.

“Well, Nandaimon has always hated Ixolde and tomorrow night isn’t going to be any different, right? They’re coming for the night’s Osaka security meeting, but they didn’t come to see the inside of this place.”

“Nandaimon’s leader, Yuuki Senga, is the only human in Japan who can teach how to use Heavy Rhythms. She sealed those techniques away at the end of the Kinki Riot, so it’s understandable she would not want them appearing in the world once more.”

“Heavy Rhythms, huh?”

“I heard at the Mountain that it was their presence that caused the Kinki Riot.”

“What do you think of that Killing Holder girl? Is she the same as Yuuki Senga?”

“You met her yesterday, didn’t you? When you had to ‘clean up’ after the Koto Guardian.”

“She’s no laughing matter,” said Saki quietly. “She has exclusive access to the world’s only combat satellite, the Suzaku Ver. 40, and she wields the giant staff Housei, which was given its power using Death Techno.”

“She destroyed an entire schoolyard and school building, didn’t she? That goes beyond an Octave of 5,000,000.”

“There’s a lot to talk about when it comes to her. After that stuff yesterday, some weird people showed up.”

“Weird?”

“Yeah.” Saki pulled an MD from his pocket. “I recorded the commotion if you want to hear it.”

“You will play it for me?”

“Of course.”

Saki smiled bitterly as he shoved the MD into an MDD and played it.

“There’s a bit of static…but they really were weird.”

A quiet voice played from the headphones extending by a cord from Saki’s neck.

“Get lost.”

“That was the Koto Chancellor. Next up is the Nagoya Chancellor. They confront each other right away.”

“Oh? Yer willin’ to get that close with yer staff? Does distance not matter with yer power?”

And immediately afterwards…

“Hyah!”

“A moron was standing between the Chancellors, so the Nagoya Chancellor shoved him toward the Koto Chancellor.”

“So that was a boy’s scream?” asked Souichirou as he crossed his arms.

“Yuuki…”

“The moron muttered that just before he was tossed behind her by the collar.”

“!?”

“See? Now, this next line is a big one.”

“It is no use. If you try using a student as a shield, I will simply kill both of you.”

Saki and Souichirou’s expressions changed at the word “kill”.

They exchanged a glance and waited for more sound without nodding.

Their silence was answered by Taeko’s staticky voice.

“A shield? …Hah. Ya haven’t seen this guy for two years…and ya call him a shield?”

“The Killing Holder probably would.”

“Hey. I thought ya’d be at least a little worried ‘bout Shoui, so what’s this? Yer callin’ him a shield that’s keepin’ ya from movin’?”

“What else could he be?”

That line was immediately followed by a low rumble from the headphones.

The sound continued for a while.

“That’s the Nagoya Chancellor’s Dragon Emperor automatically starting up. It went all the way up to the third stage right off the bat. She was pretty mad.”

“Hold it right there!”

“…Shoui!?”

“The moron restrained the Koto Chancellor from behind, which really surprised the Nagoya Chancellor.”

A sound resembling shattering glass came from the headphones.

“Yuuki!?”

“You morons!”

Saki’s voice and the sound of breaking rock came next.

“Was he unable to restrain the Koto Chancellor, so she still managed to launch an attack?” asked Souichirou.

“I used my spear to destroy the pillar of ice she sent flying. She’s a frightening girl. That was a clash between Chancellors.”

“C’mon, now! This is Osaka! Why are you acting so impulsively, Koto Chancellor!? Are you still going to act selfish after blowing away some students from our territory!? You too, Nagoya Chancellor!”

“Didn’t I tell you before?”

“You mean that you’ll do what it takes to take advantage of any opportunity? You did, Chancellor of the Turbulent City.”

"And that's exactly right. Turbulent City – Nagoya will use any means necessary to survive, even if it means bringin' shame to ourselves. …That's been our motto since the Warring States period."

"An excellent opinion," said Souichirou.

Saki grimaced and the voice from the headphones spoke his thoughts for him.

"Once you reach the Chancellor level, you aren't supposed to get to know people like that! Do you think this is a friendship manga!? Not to mention that Osaka is busy with Ixolde right now."

"Oh, shut up. Nagoya is full of fightin' on a daily basis. We sit on the dividin' line between east and west, so information warfare and corporate warfare are bein' waged on a daily, hourly, and even secondly basis. Do ya understand? …We can only trust someone who's either lost to us or defeated us."

"But…"

"I said shut up. Don't you agree, Shoui?"

"…"

"…"

The slight static of silence continued for a while.

"Oh, go ahead and continue talking, boss."

"What are ya doin', ya moron?"

"Can you not feel this dangerous atmosphere?" asked Saki's voice.

"Eh? Well, given the situation, I just couldn't help myself, so, um, uh…"

Saki switched off the MD there.

"Now then," he said with a serious expression. "We parted soon after that. …The Nagoya Chancellor's brother was killed by the Koto Chancellor, but she got weirdly angry partway through there. …Did you notice it?"

"Yes. After the Koto Chancellor treated the 'moron' you mentioned so carelessly, she started acting weird."

"That moron was our new student you saw yesterday. The Dis-Worder boy who for some reason stayed at the Nandaimon Shrine until two years ago."

Saki took a breath.

"He apparently met the Nagoya Chancellor at the Mountain. …Just as the legend says, the Dis-Worder boy is bringing calamity to Osaka."

Souichirou gave a small bitter smile.

He opened his eye and held his right false arm forward to touch the large window there.

His spread palm pointed toward the Babel Gun that looked like a layered container.

"This is a lot like two years ago."

"Yeah, it is."

"Do you think an ogre will appear this time too?"

“You’ll defeat it if it does, won’t you?”

“…”

Souichirou fell silent, so Saki did as well.

The ensemble of typing reached them from behind.

Souichirou finally spoke slowly as if to deny the rapid pace of the keystrokes.

“We will create the ultimate Rhythm here. …I just hope no calamity befalls the supernatural music of the Heavy Rhythm that no one can use. But if calamity does befall it, will it be an ogre?”

“As long as you don’t have to cut down a person. We can’t have you being called a Killing Holder too.”

“I see. But…”

“?”

Saki tilted his head and Souichirou asked him a question.

“That moron you mentioned… He seemed flustered at the end. What happened?”

“Oh, that.”

“You said he was restraining the Koto Chancellor from behind, didn’t you?”

Some serious suspicion filled Souichirou’s gaze, so Saki placed a hand on his chin as he quietly responded.

“While standing behind the Koto Chancellor, he moved his arms sharply around like this…”

“I see.”

“And he fondled her breasts.”

Part 2

1:28 PM

A vermilion shrine stood quietly in the afternoon sun.

It was Nandaimon Shrine.

Its current master, Yuuki Senga, stood before the sanctuary.

The entrance to the vermilion wooden structure was closed by a bulkhead painted with yellow and black danger stripes. “Use Extreme Caution” was written in red letters at the center.

“…”

Senga silently operated the key panel on the wall next to it.

She pressed a few keys and inserted a card she pulled from her pocket.

After a pause, she pressed her thumb against a point on the panel.

—Senga – Mechanic Tech – Take – Machine Operation – Hit.

The bulkhead moved.

It had looked like a solid piece, but it split into four pieces and receded into the sanctuary wall.

The sanctuary had looked wooden on the outside, but it was a fully-equipped modern shelter on the inside.

The bulkhead revealed a slope leading underground.

In the darkness beyond, another bulkhead could be heard opening. It led to the sanctuary proper.

The low sound of heavy moving metal was accompanied by the slope's lights turning on.

The bright light reflected off the flexible gray metal of the walls and floor.

Senga stared down the pathway and sighed.

"Maybe it's about time to let Yuuki put the sanctuary and history books to rest. Her grandfather's soul hasn't been showing up lately…"

She complained as she walked down and reached for a touch panel on the wall.

When she did…

"Hey, wait! Wait just a second!"

She turned in surprise toward a male voice.

A boy stood there.

He wore a red mountain hoodie with a tattered bottom and he looked young.

…Is he a student? But…

“Is sneaking up on a woman without letting her sense your presence your idea of a greeting?”

“Sorry, sorry. But my personal rules say you can only yourself a woman up to the age of twenty-eight. You didn’t know that?”

“I don’t like to brag, but I turned twenty-five this year.”

“That I didn’t know. That’s called being a nonagenarian, right?”

“…Are you trying to pick a fight? What brings a Critical Forcer here?”

The boy whistled lightly at what she said.

“That’s the former head teacher at the Mountain for you. How could you tell my Combat Style?”

“The soles of your shoes are scraped up at the toes. That’s because you shift your center of gravity with kicks, isn’t it? It’s impressive that both shoes are like that.”

“I see…”

He looked into the sanctuary behind Senga.

“I’ve been wondering. What’s in there?”

“What will you do if I tell you?”

“Feel impressed. …Hey, quit sighing and tell me.”

“Hah. This is where the Devices, prosthetics, and history books created by the Nandaimon Shrine are kept. They’re all so old that their spirits tend to get a little rowdy, so they have to be put to rest once a day.”

“Hmm. Do you have the rumored hand of that Rashoumon ogre? Y’know, the arm of the ogre Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou fought and slayed last year.”

Senga smiled bitterly.

“That arm is valuable for research, so it’s being preserved. But it wasn’t a Rashoumon ogre.”

“That’s just what the rumors say. I don’t actually think it was either.”

“You’re an interesting boy. Everything you say is so vague. …What are you truly after?”

Senga gave a small smile and the boy smiled back.

“I’m here to defeat the Koto Chancellor.”

Both the sudden comment and how casually he had said it left Senga speechless.

A short time passed.

“…What?”

“After all, she’s the only Chancellor that’s killed someone over the last ten years, right? Nanba Souichirou’s strong too, but he killed an ogre, not a person. That means defeating the Koto Chancellor would be better from an image standpoint.”

“…”

“Huh? Eh? Umm, don’t give me that scary look. I was just stopping by, but she wasn’t here. She wasn’t at her school either. I had nothing to do with her gone, but then I spotted you.”

With that, he took a step toward the inside of the sanctuary.

“Do not go inside!” shouted Senga.

“…”

“The sanctuary is under constant surveillance from the Suzaku Ver. 40 in orbit.”

“You mean that combat satellite that was launched before the Wort Bombe created the Great Canopy? …So what about its surveillance?”

“If anyone but me goes inside, a word particle cannon will fire on them from orbit when they leave. Do you want to be hit by a cannon blast that destroys everything in a kilometer at full power?”

“That’s just cruel. Wouldn’t you destroy your own Koto region with that?”

“It’s better than having anything taken from here. The people of Koto are prepared for that.”

“Hmm.”

The boy nodded and took a step back.

He stuck both hands in his mountain hoodie’s pockets and let out a disinterested sigh.

“The Suzaku Ver. 40 is a machine, so it wouldn’t be using a Tech to fire… And even if I dodged it, I wouldn’t be in the clear with a blast of that size.”

Senga frowned at that.

“Tech? Dodged it?”

“Hm? What about it?”

Senga stared at the boy’s face and their gazes clashed.

It took some time before she spoke.

“I once…” She took a breath as if hesitating. “I once heard someone say the same thing as you. During the Kinki Riot thirteen years ago, an idiot said they could dodge the Suzaku Ver. 40’s cannon.”

“…”

“Tell me your name and your teacher’s name.”

“Will you fire on me from orbit if I don’t?”

“That might not help if you’re who I think you are.”

“You’re overestimating me,” he said with a bitter smile.

He straightened his back, looked down at Senga, and spoke with a pleasant smile.

“I’m Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide. …My teacher’s name is Iba Masaaki. You know him, don’t you?”

His question was answered with silence.

Senga's gaze wandered.

She looked down, seemed about to say something, and then looked Hisahide in the eye again.

"I was right."

"That old man said you, Yuuki Senga, would probably make up your mind pretty quickly."

"Only probably? That idiot's underestimating me. Does this mean Iba created a White Noise user!?"

"I wanted to be one."

"Why?"

"To meet my sister and become the king."

Hisahide continued in an almost arrogant tone.

"I'd like to hear the opinion of Yuuki Senga, leader of the Nandaimon Shrine, former head teacher of Mt. Kouya's Mountain, and leader of the Kansai Temple and Shrine League. Are the rumors true that Ixolde is going to create the most powerful Rhythm?"

"You came to Kansai because you think they are true, didn't you?"

"I want to hear the truth from you, the only person to oppose the Ixolde project."

He lowered his hips, crossed his arms, and sat on the ground.

"I'm not moving until you tell me."

“What will you do if I tell you?”

“Cry.”

His tone was jocular, but a horrible stillness filled his expression.

He looked up at Senga with the look of a student awaiting his teacher’s lesson.

—Senga – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

“I see.”

“…”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking or what you feel obligated to do, but you must deem this necessary.”

Hisahide said nothing.

He waited motionlessly for Senga to speak, so she responded to his silence.

“The Rhythm it will create is far more powerful than the Wind Rhythm Kusanagi that Souichirou uses. It will be the Heavy Rhythm Yamata, aka the Flame High. That mysterious Rhythm is said to exist in this Land of Fire and Land of the Rising Sun.”

She took a breath.

“But it was lost when used by Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Midori during the Kinki Riot.”

Part 3

3:41 PM

Osaka was a cramped city.

It was known as the sloped city, but the city center was relatively flat. Climbing to the top of a tall tower was enough to see it all.

The Osaka Hilton was a hotel in Osaka's Umeda district. The sky lounge on the top floor of the thirty-five story hotel allowed one to look down on Osaka as the setting sun washed over it.

A couple looked down at the city like that from a two-person table by the window.

They were Tokyo Vice Chancellor Aoi Hijiri and Tokyo Special Duty Officer Ikemaru Takahiro.

Ikemaru still wore his three-piece suit and black leather gloves while Aoi roughly wore a blouson and jeans.

They looked somehow mismatched.

"…"

Aoi looked at the silhouettes of Osaka that had grown sharper in the setting sun.

"I can't seem to find them, Takahiro."

Ikemaru asked her a question while still looking out the window.

"Do you mean Takada?"

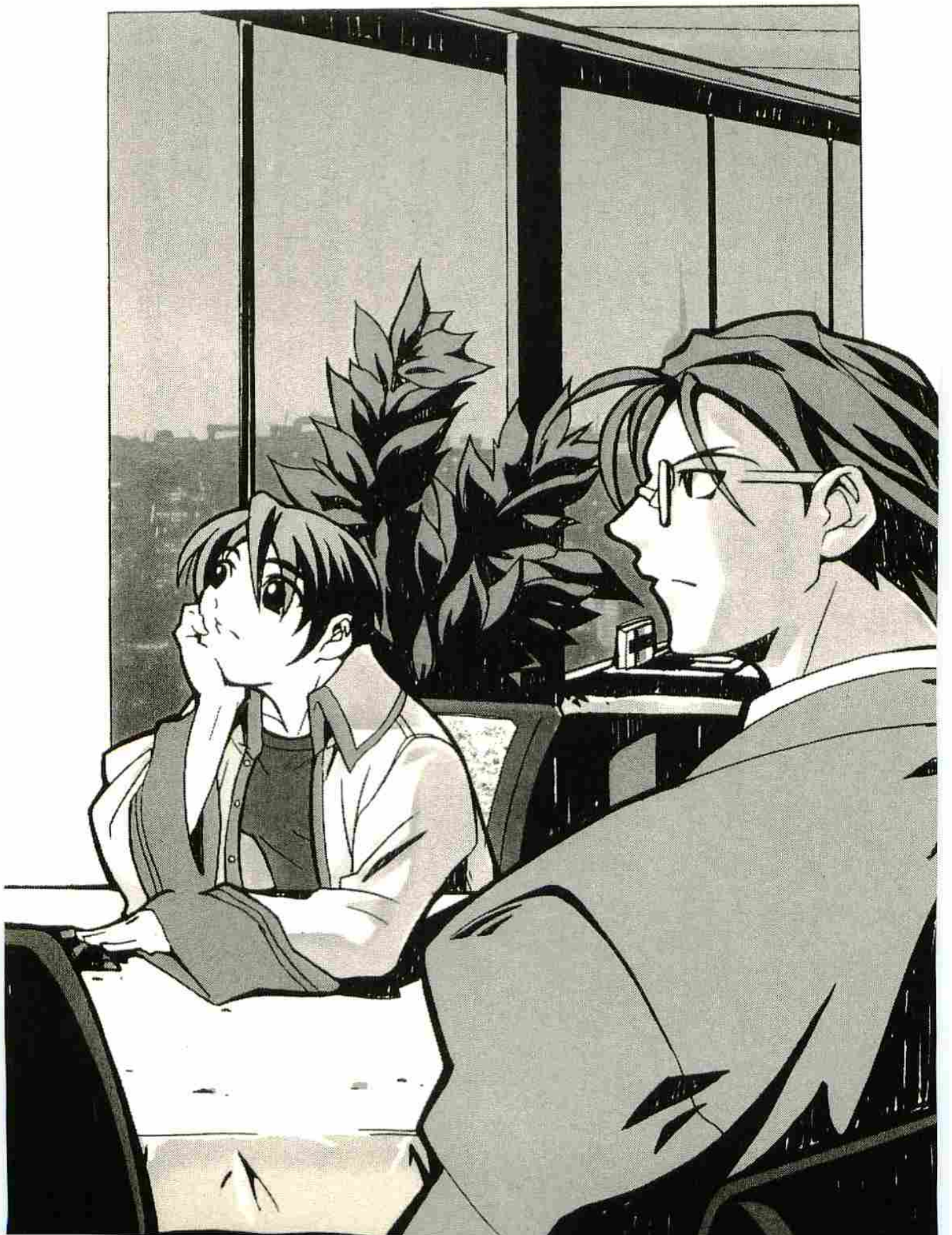
"Hm? No, not her. The cherry blossoms blooming in winter that my mom mentioned."

“We have only been here for half a day. Aren’t you getting ahead of yourself if you’re even thinking about finding them quite yet?”

“Master Iba probably knows the answer, but he can be so stingy.”

“He called them the cherry blossoms that bring misfortune, didn’t he?”

Aoi nodded.



“Apparently, the Tokyo Chancellor and Osaka Chancellor saw them during the Kinki Riot and it brought misfortune to everything.”

“The winter cherry blossoms that triggered a riot, huh?”

While Ikemaru thought, Aoi turned a slight smile his way.

“I’m causing you a ton of trouble by making you come with me, aren’t I?”

Ikemaru corrected his posture and looked straight at Aoi.

He adjusted his tie a little and took a breath.

“Please do not worry about me. My family prides itself in being a family of Japan’s greatest businessmen. That is why my parents agreed that I should visit Osaka while I am young.”

“Well, that is why I can stay in a hotel like this. …I’m thankful.”

“I am delighted to hear it.”

Ikemaru placed a hand on his chest, bowed, and smiled bitterly at the troubled smile on Aoi’s face.

“Your parents really are amazing, Takahiro. …Although maybe that’s because I don’t have either of mine anymore.”

“Didn’t you come to this city in order to understand the two of them better?”

“…”

“Before the Kinki Riot, they met below the winter cherry blossoms you mentioned, didn’t they?”

“Yes. And that’s what brought misfortune to my mom…and that man. Who told you that?”

“Your father when he was alive.”

“He always did tend to tell the most important things to people other than his family.”

Just as Aoi sighed, their iced coffee and iced tea arrived.

Ikemaru took the iced tea and Aoi drank some of the iced coffee without placing a straw in the glass.

“Are you sure you don’t want to order a cake or something?” he asked her.

“This is being charged to your card, isn’t it?”

“I see. And we usually pay with our shared wallet. …But I don’t mind.”

“No, I wouldn’t feel right doing that.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Is that why you only ordered toast at the restaurant earlier?”

“No, that’s because I’m on a diet.”

“But my mother told me women are more aesthetically pleasing when a little plump.”

“I’m more worried about building up any more muscle. And it’s an issue with my personal aesthetics.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Ikemaru tilted his head and Aoi answered with her head resting on her hand.

“You’re the kind of person that split us up between a boys room and a girls room, so you wouldn’t understand.”

“?”

He tilted his head and she smiled bitterly.

“That’s why we haven’t made any progress after fourteen years together.”

“?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. More importantly, has Seigi really not made it to Osaka yet?”

“I did tell her about this place when we left Tokyo.”

“She’s your cousin, so you need to take better care of her. …Besides, did you tell Taromaru too? That girl can make prophecies, but she can be a little careless when it comes to reality.”

Aoi’s gaze turned toward Ikemaru’s hands.

He wore black leather gloves as if to hide them.

The corners of his mouth tightened a little when he noticed her gaze.

“Are you afraid of my power?”

“No. I know that your tone of voice changes when you speak with me.”

She looked to the seat next to him.

His scarf was draped over the back of the chair.

“Thanks for using that crappy handmade one.”

“And thank you for being so kind to someone as constantly rude as me.”

“It’s fine. And I’m not much better since I tend to talk in a pretty masculine way with other people.”

“I think it has a wonderfully gallant ring to it.”

“Oh? Then will you speak to me as rudely as you do to others?”

“I cannot do that. You are a unique and precious person to me, so of course I would speak to you differently from others.”

“Well, as long as that’s what you really think. I still have room for improvement too.”

“Is there a problem with your Shinkage Style that opposes Rhythms with a divine shadow?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Aoi looked to the leather gloves covering Ikemaru’s hands. “It’s okay, Takahiro. I’m willing to use the power of my Shinkage Style to let you touch me.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“I know why you won’t kiss me on the lips,” she said quietly. “Kissing someone on the lips lets you read their Live, doesn’t it? You’re a Word Master, after all.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I like the stylish compromise we have going. Remember what you’ve always said? A kiss to the forehead is for parental love, to the cheek is for friendship, and to the eyelid like you always do…”

She smiled bitterly.

“Now I’m too embarrassed to finish.”

“Just remember that a kiss to the lips signifies lust.”

“Oh? How dirty.”

He fell silent at her teasing tone of voice and she looked out the window again.

She smiled and changed her expression. Her face left no opening.

“But Nakamura has it tough, too. He went to finish off the Koto Chancellor today…and then he’s attacking the Osaka Chancellor’s Officers headquarters, right? Will he be okay?”

“People are not made to defeat him.”

“He tries to hide it, but he’s pretty panicked. …If only Seigi could be by his side.”

“None of us can let down our guard until those two are brought back to Nagoya.”

Before Ikemaru finished speaking, a sound came from Aoi’s watch.

She quickly stopped the electronic tone that rang throughout the quiet lounge and then she looked around.

All of the other guests were looking their way, so she shrugged and smiled bitterly.

“How about we get going too?”

“I have a target prepared. There is a black motorcycle and a white car in the parking lot.”

Ikemaru stood up and removed his leather gloves.

His hands were untanned, pale, and could almost be described as delicate.

“How about we start stirring up some trouble for the Osaka Chancellor and Nagoya Chancellor?”

Aoi nodded at the mention of the Osaka Chancellor.

“Do you remember that my mom was originally from Osaka?”

“She knew a lot about the Nanba family’s Modified Purple Electricity Style of Dance Combat that was derived from the Kage Style.”

“I wonder which is stronger, the Modified Purple Electricity Style or the Shinkage style that my mom created with that man?”

Ikemaru gave a brief answer to her question.

“Today we are only introducing ourselves. I am sure the time will eventually come to truly crush him.”

Chapter 5: The Battle Begins (Vs. Com. Instructions)

Part 1

6:30 PM

Coastal lights illuminated Osaka Bay in the dark winter night and that bay was visible to the right of a train traveling south.

The limited express train cut through the nighttime sea breeze.

The third car from the front contained only two people.

One was a one-eyed student, Osaka Chancellor Nanba Souichirou.

The other was an elderly man in a suit.

They were both silent and motionless.

Nanba Souichirou crossed his false arms and stared out the window while the elderly man stared at the boy.

A roar cut in through the sounds of the train itself. An airplane was flying low in the sky above Osaka.

It was passing over the train on its way to Kansai International Airpor.t

Its great mass produced a great noise that made its presence known within the train.

The jumbo jet's lights glided through the sky at what seemed like arm's reach outside the window.

The roar grew more distant and the sounds of the train returned.

"…"

The two people's silence continued until the elderly man finally spoke to Souichirou.

"The Sakai Branch dojo is up next…but aren't you tired?"

"This is my duty. After what happened two years ago, that is."

"But…"

"Iwai, surely you too haven't forgotten who it was that fought most valiantly against that ogre created from the failed test activation of Ixolde."

"…"

"It was gratitude for that and my possession of Kusanagi that led your Houzenji family to support my Modified Purple Electricity Style, wasn't it?"

He smiled bitterly.

"But someone else might have been able to defeat it more effectively."

"You are the only one that can slay an ogre as you are a descendent of the Watanabe clan, Japan's only ogre-busters. Isn't that why Kusanagi has been passed down by your family ever since the Great Mistake two hundred years ago?"

Souichirou interrupted the old man's admonishing tone.

"You certainly are talkative."

Souichirou turned away from the window and calmly crossed his legs, creating the mechanical sounds of prosthetics.

"A certain girl has been called the Killing Holder ever since that time."

"You mean the Koto Guardian?"

"She can control the Suzaku Ver. 40… Shouldn't you have asked her to do this instead?"

The man did not reply and silence fell.

Souichirou faced the window once more and he heard another airplane pass by overhead.

"Iwai."

"Yes?"

"Enough small talk. Tell me why you took the train with me."

"…Why? What do you mean by that?"

"You are Iwai Sanzou, head butler of the Houzenji family. You support the wealthy Houzenji Group and you control the greatest intelligence network in the Osaka region. Are you asking me to believe you appeared before me for no real reason?"

The elderly butler named Iwai Sanzou twisted his lips a little at that. He formed a slight smile and looked to Souichirou again.

“There is something I wish to tell you and you alone.”

“I see your attempts to make people feel indebted to you are as blatant as ever.”

“Now,” said Iwai while ignoring that comment. “It is about Nagoya.”

“Nagoya? I met with Nagoya’s Chancellor yesterday, but I didn’t hear anything.”

“Of course not. The communications network of Nagoya’s Chancellor’s Officers has been completely wiped out. Without anyone to transport the information, Nagoya’s Chancellor has no way of knowing the details.”

“Hm? Are you saying something happened in Nagoya?”

“Nagoya’s Chancellor’s Officers have been destroyed.”

Souichirou immediately asked another question.

“You haven’t told anyone else about this, have you?”

His expression changed a little as he asked.

It grew tense.

“…?”

Souichirou’s gaze landed on a certain shadow on the coastal road running parallel with the railroad track.

The golden yellow streetlights revealed the shadow to be a youth on a motorcycle.

They were riding alongside the train with the winter night wind blowing their white blouson behind him.

The full-face black helmet expressionlessly reflected the streetlights.

“Who could that be? I am impressed they can match our speed when it is this cold out.”

Iwai Sanzou commented from behind and Souichirou responded by taking action.

Without speaking a word, he stood up and drew the sword at his waist.

“Souichirou-sama?”

“That is an enemy.”

“Why?”

“Ask them.”

As soon as Souichirou said that, the person outside the window moved.

The rider pulled something like a rod out of the motorcycle frame and swung it.

The golden yellow streetlights reflected brightly off of the rod as it grew longer.

It was a metal hexagonal rod.

“Stand back, Iwai!”

As soon as Souichirou gave a shout, light appeared outside the window.

Intense light resided in the rider's hexagonal rod.

That rod instantly became a bullet of light with a diameter of about three meters.

"Are they firing a Lightning High Rhythm projectile?"

"Not many people can control light on such a large scale."

"Quiet. Move back through the cars and have all the passengers evacuate to the rearmost one."

Iwai Sanzou nodded in agreement and immediately took off running.

After seeing the old man pass through the door to the next car back, Souichirou returned his attention to the window.

"Should I hurry?"

The rider had just raised the giant mass of light atop the motorcycle.

The ether being transformed into light and flames by a Rhythm had become a single entity.

The three meters of light had become the same as a wrecking ball filled with intense heat. If it hit the train, the train could derail.

"They're at that level…and still unnamed?"

As he muttered those words, the light suddenly flew toward him.

"Oh?"

With a calm voice of surprise, he stopped, turned away from the approaching light, and walked toward the next car up.

He took one, two, then three steps.

He also sang the Word used to emit his Kusanagi Rhythm.

Ah.

It was only that short sound.

Kusanagi was a Wind Rhythm. Unlike the currently popular Over Rhythms, Wind Rhythms had their foundation in the primitive music of ancient times. No MD was needed to activate them and only the bare minimum was needed to be said in order to break through everything.

He swung the sword at his waist.

—Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Train Car Slice – Hit!

The outside light filled the window and cast Souichirou's shadow on the opposite wall.

Even so, he silently continued walking and took his ninth step.

—Souichirou – Kusanagi/Sword Tech – Multi-Take – Train Car Slice – Hit!

While taking his tenth step, his sword moved twice.

The blade calmly drew a large circle in front of him.

It was the gentle motion of flowing water and no strength could be sensed behind it.

The seats, walls, and floor did not intrude the blade's movement.

It pierced through them all.

A moment later, the light collided with the train car.

Part 2

6:35 PM

Light struck metal.

The sound of a hammer on stone rang out again and again.

The train car shook and the shock-resistant glass shattered when it could not withstand the bending of the metal walls.

Souichirou was the only one inside the shaking train car and he remained motionless after sheathing his sword.

A roar sounded out.

The dry sound resembled splitting stone and it coincided with the bullet of light exploding from its collision.

Souichirou was brightly illuminated inside the car and his sword guard eyepatch glowed dully.

At the same time, he took action.

He gently lifted his vertical scabbard to eye level.

"!"

He then struck the plastic floor with the tip of the scabbard.

The sound of the powerful strike joined the countless metallic screams surrounding him.

A change occurred after that.

The car was sliced into three pieces.

The two gentle slashes made while walking had cut this space free.

That block had received all of the impacts and noise and thus took on the fate meant for the entire train. Just like removing a single piece of sliced bread from the loaf, the block was knocked to the left and away from the rest of the train car.

Sparks scattered from the floor because the metal pieces were still biting into each other and creating a lot of friction.

More sparks flew and all of the movement and noise came to a brief stop.

A moment later, the ball of light and hexagonal rod exploded outside the window.

After a solid sound, the movement resumed.

One step ahead of Souichirou, the floor contained between two straight cracks was lifted up.

As that piece toppled over, the floor disappeared upwards.

The seats and floor collapsed to the left before Souichirou's eyes.

As soon as the floor reached shoulder height, he used his right false arm to strike the bottom of the floor.

With an intense sound, sparks flew from the metal seam and a red circle was drawn around the cut.

That settled it all.

No more sparks formed.

The train car had been completely cut apart. The car separated into three sections with an ensemble of roaring sounds.

The giant piece of metal bent and spun as it fell from the elevated track.

—Souichirou – Sight Tech –Take – Confirm Landing Location – Hit!

They were passing by an elementary school schoolyard.

After confirming that the cut-away car fell there, he faced forward again.

He stood in the front of the train car and the back of it followed after a short gap. Both had completely escaped the impact of the attack.

He heard emergency alarms coming from the unharmed cars.

“Souichirou-sama!”

The door to the next car back opened and Iwai Sanzou stepped out.

He took a few steps into the trisected car and looked around.

“Splendid! Well done, Souichirou-sama!”

“I am sick of hearing your praise.”

With that blunt response, Souichirou looked outside from the edge of the car.

The train had stopped accelerating in order to come to a natural stop, but it had not stopped yet. The ocean and coastal road rushed by in his vision.

"Did they get away, Souichirou-sama?"

—Souichirou – Hear Tech – Take – Track – Hit!

"No, I can still hear the engine."

—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Activate Reinforced Internals – Hit.

"Who exactly…are they?"

—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Activate Reinforced Muscle Integrity – Hit.

"They are an enemy."

—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Activate False Arms ALR-C31 – Hit.

"You said that before…"

—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Activate False Legs LLR-C39 – Hit.

"Is any other description needed?"

—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Cut Prosthetic Limiters – Hit.

"You're still as obsessed with combat as you were two years ago, aren't you?"

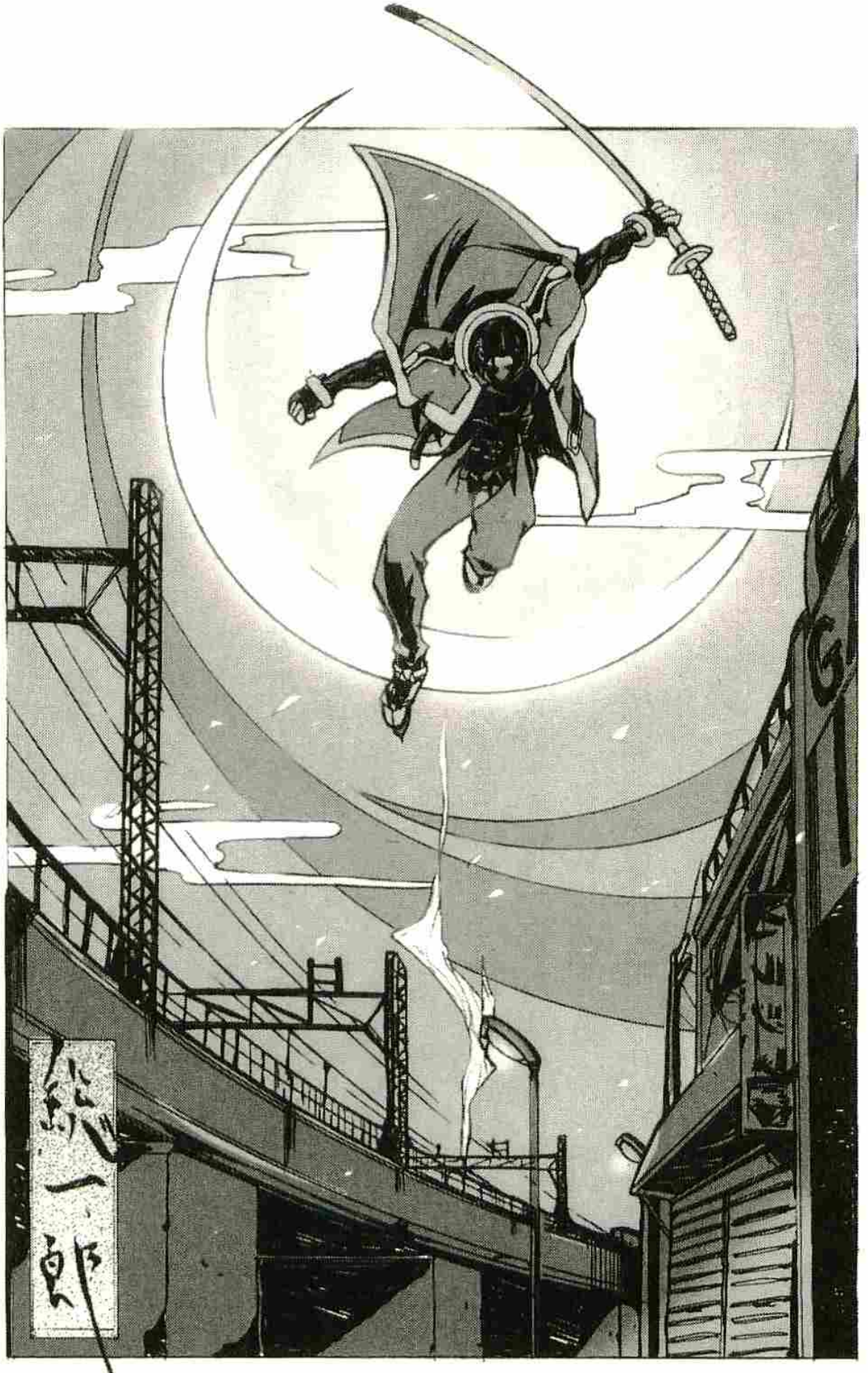
—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Install Gym Tech Booster – Hit.

“That is because I gained this body. Thanks to my two battles with the ogre and thanks to your support.”

—Souichirou – Steel Tech – Take – Install Sight Tech Booster – Hit.

“Are you going to pursue them? …What about getting to Sakai?”

—Souichirou – Mind Tech – Take – Control – Hit.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“I might be late, but I will be there.”

With that, Souichirou jumped from the train car.

—Souichirou – Gym Tech – Take – Attitude Control – Hit.

He landed on the elevated track’s fence and began running.

He ran alongside the train for a bit, but he quickly passed it.

He was fast.

—Souichirou – Savate/Gym Tech – Multi-Take – Great Leap – Hit.

He leaped toward the crescent moon floating in the sky.

He jumped high enough to look down on the city of Osaka.

Part 3

6:51 PM

The moon was out.

It could be seen in the night sky even from the shopping district near Osaka Station.

But in a shopping district at nearly seven in the evening, very few people were taking the time to leisurely look up at the moon.

Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko was one such leisurely person.

She stood in front of the Osaka Hilton hotel that gave a view of both Osaka Station and Hankyu Umeda Station from south of the former station. She was staring into the night sky while sitting on a sidewalk fire hydrant.

During this moon viewing, she tilted her head with a cellphone in her right hand.

“The emergency line won’t get through? And the Student Council’s number is too busy to get in, so the answering machine kicks in. …What happened?”

She set the phone to wait for a call and put it in her pocket.

After a sigh, she fixed both her eyes and mind on the moon.

She was tall.

Even while sitting, she kept about the same height as the people walking along the sidewalk.

Her ponytail only accentuated her height.

But even so, the three claws of the Dragon Emperor false arm touched the sidewalk as it hung from her left shoulder.

It was a massive prosthetic.

A green combat-use license plate was attached to the shoulder like an armor panel.

The artificial muscles and framework made it an embodiment of offensive functionality.

She touched the Dragon Emperor’s armor with her right hand.

“It’s been a year since I met Shoui and got this at the Mountain. I still haven’t used its final stage, though.”

She stood up and used her flesh-and-blood right hand to stroke the dragon relief on the Dragon Emperor's shoulder.

She stroked it like petting a cat's back and the shoulder transformed somewhat.

The armor split open and bluish-white light escaped the gap.

"Hey. don't get carried away just cause it's yer monthly moonlight bath."

The Dragon Emperor emitted steam from the exhaust pipe at the top of the upper arm.

It was a living motion.

A slight sound came from the shoulder armor that was swollen out into a single horn at the top. She had not done a thing, but it began opening and closing its armor panels for some self maintenance.

It almost looked like something lurked within the armor.

Taeko narrowed her eyes as she watched the Dragon Emperor.

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit!

A stabbing presence suddenly reached her.

"!?"

After that presence, she heard loud voices.

They were screams.

The people walking along the road all produced the screams of victims.

The killer intent and the attacker were elsewhere.

—Taeko – Hear Tech – Take – Sound Classification – Hit!

Taeko picked through the overlapping screams to listen only to the sound that mattered.

It was the rumbling of an engine.

The vehicle was clearly out of control instead of driving normally along.

It came from the center of the main road to her right.

—Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Dragon Emperor #1 Activation – Hit!

"Dragon Emperor! Take it up to #3!"

With that shout, Taeko turned around and saw her enemy.

A white sports car was drifting sideways around the roundabout in front of the station.

—Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Spot – Hit.

The car was empty.

There was no driver beyond the windshield.

"Is it being radio controlled!?"

She turned her right shoulder forward and held the Dragon Emperor at the ready.

“Didn’t ya know a Steel Master has no blind spots or limits?”

Meanwhile, the sports car drove straight toward her.

The white car bounced over the curb and onto the sidewalk.

It was less than thirty meters away, so it would arrive in two seconds at sixty kph.

With the sound of tires on the sidewalk, it shot straight toward her.

A bus stop was knocked from the sidewalk.

The screeching of tires and roar of the wind were louder than the roar of the engine. That was proof that it was picking up momentum with its speed.

The sports car brightened its headlights as it charged straight forward.

People screamed, but Taeko was unfazed.

She had the Dragon Emperor and her enemy was not interested in a simple battle.

The change came suddenly.

The empty white sports car hopped up.

“!?”

It was a quick movement. Like a cat pouncing on its prey, the car’s tires acted as legs and it jumped high into the air.

It was an impossible action, but it really did happen and the sports car vanished from Taeko’s field of vision.

"…Kh!"

—Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Locate Enemy – Hit!

She could no longer see the moon overhead.

The white car was blotting out the sky.

For the first time in her life, Taeko saw a car perform a moonsault.

The mechanical beast intended to crush her.

Based on its angle of rotation, the bottom of the car's front end would strike her.

If she dodged, it would slam into the hotel, so she had to intercept it.

Her impatience brought a few questions to mind.

Why was she being targeted?

How could the car perform this odd action?

Thoughts about Shoui and Yuuki also raced through her mind.

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Focus on Battle – Hit!

"Dragon Emperor!" she shouted. "Activate Thunder High!"

The Dragon Emperor responded with a full-body roar.

The metal arm's armor trembled as it roared. The vibration had a set rhythm which easily produced the same music as a Rhythm.

Taeko sang her Words to match the Dragon Emperor's cry.

She sang the song that summoned lightning.

Nobody takes the middle road

Nothing lives or dies

It all either falls into ruin or survives

Everyone, everyone, everyone

The Dragon Emperor emitted bluish-white electricity from its shoulder, fist, and claws.

Now it only needed to move.

The bottom of the sports car had arrived within arm's reach, so Taeko did not hesitate to step forward.

In a normal fight, she would have sent a jabbing feint out from her right shoulder, but that flesh-and-blood arm would be of little use against a car.

It all came down to the one attack, so she made her move.

—Taeko – Gym Tech – Take – Step Forward – Super Hit.

—Taeko – Savate Tech – Take – Leap – Hit.

—Taeko – Thunder High Rhythm/Box Tech – Multi-Take – Ether Strike – Super Hit!

A series of Tech decisions created a series of movements.

She used her entire body to perform a smash uppercut with the Dragon Emperor and it struck the car's chassis.

Her anti-shock reflective-armor bodysuit briefly fixed her joints in place to receive the Dragon Emperor's several tons of recoil.

There was a loud sound of impact, but it did not end there. She knew the car was empty, so she kept her attack going to the end.

While still punching the car from below, she forcibly jumped upwards.

With a roar, the sports car was carried into the night sky.

The Dragon Emperor's fist stabbed into the engine space and started tearing through the engine as they continued to ascend.

Immediately, the Dragon Emperor emitted lightning in plasma form.

The car let out a scream as the heat caused the glass and decorations to explode.

This was the power of the Thunder High.

The night sky was dyed white.

She yelled in the center of that light while tearing the car's engine to pieces.

"Perish!"

She swung the Dragon Emperor all the way up.

The metal emitted a further scream, the lightning light gathered together, and the car's bumper was melted apart.

Taeko added a gentle rotation to her uppercut and prepared for her landing.

The sports car's white paint had been scorched beyond recognition and the force of the blow sent it flying even higher in the opposite direction from Taeko.

Just as she landed, a flower blossomed from the car in the night sky.

A deafening explosion sounded out.

The crimson flames scattered metal components in every direction. The residual effect of the Thunder High caused each one to become plasma and vanish in midair.

Taeko swung up the Dragon Emperor and smiled.

At the same time…

—Taeko – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Detect – Hit.

A single person moved against the flow of people who were panicking and gathering on the road.

The boy wore an obviously high-quality three-piece suit and had a white scarf around his shoulders.

He alone moved against the crowd, was not panicked, did not look to Taeko through his glasses, and calmly walked to the entrance of the Osaka Hilton.

"What an odd guy…"

Just as she said that, a slight shadow covered the moonlight falling from above.

"?"

The source of that shadow landed right in front of her eyes.

Someone holding a sheathed sword landed there.

It happened so quickly that not even Taeko had time to put up her guard.

“!?”

The sound of his landing had a metallic ring to it.

That was the unique sound of someone with prosthetics.

Taeko recognize the boy who landed in a kneeling position, so she shouted out on reflex.

“Osaka Chancellor…Nanba Souichirou!?”

Chapter 6: The Battle Assembles (Background Information on Character Traits)

Part 1

7:01 PM

"Nagoya's Chancellor's Officers were?"

Taeko spoke to Souichirou with sirens blaring in the background.

Souichirou moved his thick head vertically while backlit by the lights of the Osaka Hilton hotel.

"I see," muttered Taeko. "If the 1st Special Duty Officer was taken out, it makes sense that our special line wouldn't get through."

"Can you contact your family?"

"The Student Council must be restrictin' the information. They didn't know anything."

"If both the current Chancellor and the Yamashita family that has held the Chancellor position generation after generation are unaware…this is a problem."

Taeko did not even nod.

"Nagoya's Student Council ain't too fond of the Chancellor's Officers. As the Turbulent City, our ability to fight gives us more influence."

“So it seems. Is this an internal issue?”

“They’ll probably make some kind of decision by the time I get back from seein’ Ixolde. They’ll say they couldn’t contact me.”

Taeko gave a bitter smile of self-deprecation and slowly looked around.

They stood in front of the Osaka Hilton hotel as sirens blared. The sports car she had destroyed lay upside down in the road running by in front of Osaka Station.

“Anyway… To get back on topic, ya chased down the motorcycle that attacked ya, cut it down over there, and found it had no driver?”

“Yes. Just as I fired Kusanagi’s sword pressure, the driverless motorcycle tried to turn a corner. And after I destroyed it, I heard another commotion.”

“And ya showed up just in time to see the car I’d crushed, huh? …And they were both radio controlled?”

“I am having our Special Duty Officers check on that. They are asking a general aviation institute to go over all of the wireless signals for the area at that time. That will tell us if they were radio controlled or not.”

Souichirou crossed his false arms.

In front of their eyes, youths in school uniforms were frantically running around inspecting the scene and guiding traffic. They all wore armbands with the mark of Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers.

Taeko commented on them.

“Osaka sure does follow the academy rules strictly. We just have all the adults and kids work together without much structure.”

Hearing that, Souichirou’s one eye turned to a single police car stopped on the road.

A single supervising officer was there.

“The academy rules guarantee a separation between the adults and children.”

“That started when a bunch of people died in a student conflict and the adults wanted to wash their hands of any responsibility for what the students did, right?”

“And now it has spread to the entire world…giving us this.”

Sirens filled the air and people ran about to direct traffic, inspect the scene, or question witnesses, but it was all being done by students from Souichirou and Taeko’s generation.

“This has the same unpleasant atmosphere as the ogre two years ago.”

“But from what I’d heard, ya beat that ogre in the end. And since ya’d cut off the ogre’s arm, it didn’t break down into its component Lives like the rest of it, so it’s stored in the Nandaimon Shrine.”

“But the price of victory was my arms, legs, and an eye.”

“Nothin’ wrong with that. Now ya’ve got nothin’ more to lose.”

Souichirou looked to Taeko’s left arm aka the Dragon Emperor.

“Was your false arm a choice?”

“A choice?”

“Did you choose it of your own free will? That is, did you chop off your original arm for it?”

She smiled bitterly back at him.

“I had my reasons.”

“…”

“I am who I am now because of this arm. …Before getting it, there was one person I thought I could never forgive, but, well, now I feel like I could forgive them.”

“One person?”

“Have ya ever thought about killin’ someone?” Taeko’s bitter smile deepened. “If so, I’ll tell you.”

Souichirou said nothing.

He simply shrugged and looked up into the night sky as he listened as Taeko’s smile grew to a bitter laugh.

The moon floated there.

It was a bluish-white crescent moon.

Part 2

7:13 PM

…The moon looked a lot like this on that night.

As Shoui muttered those words in his heart, he had already closed his eyes and started sinking into darkness.

He was falling asleep.

He felt a strong wind blowing around him.

When he closed his eyes, he could only sense the wind, the noise, and the floor below him while he was surrounded in darkness.

His senses constantly informed him of his own body's presence sprawled out on the floor.

His mind was looking at darkness.

If he did open his eyes, he would find himself on the roof of Osaka Prefectural #2's student dorm building, but he did not do so.

There was something he had to remember on his own.

It had been worth cutting short his daily nighttime combat training.

This had been bothering him since the previous night.

This was another important memory besides the one of the pain that had become a phantom pain.

"…"

He sighed.

His vision was filled with darkness.

He gave himself over to this unimaginable darkness that he could only see by closing his eyes.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Regulate – Hit.

He used some Techs.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Release Memory – Hit.

The Tech vividly resurrected his memory.

Part 3

7:14 PM (12/18/1993)

At that time three years before, Yuuki Yuuki had just been named the Koto Guardian and had the current Koto Chancellor's recommendation for being the next Chancellor.

It was a cold and clear December night.

Shoui sat below the eaves of the Nandaimon Shrine's detached room.

Yuuki sat next to him.

It was the usual situation.

He wore his training outfit of a black T-shirt and his school uniform pants.

She wore her vermilion and white shrine maiden outfit that acted as the Nandaimon Shrine's uniform.

A night breeze blew through and Shoui spoke while facing forward.

"It's been two weeks since you last visited me during my night training."

"…"

Yuuki did not reply, but she did speak.

“Sorry.”

Her unemotional tone showed no hint of apology, but Shoui nodded.

“It’s not like you have a choice. Your grandmother was one of the best during the Showa era…”

“It’s because I’m from Nandaimon.”

“…”

“You were against it, weren’t you? You didn’t want me to become the Koto Guardian.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He sensed Yuuki turning to face him.

“My grandmother told me the day before yesterday.”

That led Shoui to slap his forehead and sigh.

“Why does she have to tell everyone about all the pathetic things I do?”

“She laughed and said there was a ‘kid’ who was afraid I would leave him.”

Shoui let out a sigh of resignation and collapsed onto his back.

He sprawled out on the floor.

…I can’t believe this.

He pulled his bandanna over his eyes to block his view.

With his vision gone, he was more sensitive to the presences around him.

He heard Yuuki speak without warning.

“It seems you were concerned for me, Shoui-kun.”

“Now that you’ve found out, it just makes me a worrier.”

He pulled his bandanna further down and sat up.

He sighed inside his personal darkness.

“I can’t believe this. Did you visit me to tell me that?”

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s pathetic.”

“Really? This is complicated.”

“What makes it complicated?”

“Because I was glad.”

Shoui froze in place with his bandanna still covering his eyes, but she did not stop speaking there.

“Is it ‘pathetic’ to bring me happiness?”

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Emotional Control – Hit.

Shoui remained silent, so she asked about it.

“Why are you so silent all of a sudden? …Did I say something weird?”

“Yes, a little… How should I put it? You made me a just a little bit extremely surprised…somewhat.”

“What kind of surprise is that?”

He responded to the bitter smile in her voice.

“I never expected to hear you say that… As rude as that may be.”

“Should I have chosen my words more carefully?”

He nodded.

“It’s a problem.”

“Why?”

“I’d been keeping quiet because I knew you had become one of those people.”

“One of those people?”

“…”

He tried to maintain his silence but could not.

“You’ve become someone who can kill people.”

“I see.”

“You know why I have no Words, right? During the Kinki Riot…”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“I’m afraid of seeing any relatives or people close to me as corpses.”

“I said you don’t have to tell me. I understand.”

"…You understand?"

A small tremor had entered his voice.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Emotional Control – Miss.

Something like impatience pushed his thoughts forward and formed his next words.

"You couldn't possibly understand… I was trapped in the darkness and had to make a friend of the nothingness…"

"Shoui-kun?"

When he heard Yuuki's voice, the night appeared before his eyes.

She had pushed up his bandanna.

As soon as he felt the night air on his cheeks, she turned his head toward her.

"You don't cry like you used to when you talk about that."

"…"

She wrapped her arms around his head and pulled him in from the side.

Confusion filled his mind and he closed his eyes so as not to look her in the eye.

As soon as he did, his head was carelessly pulled even closer.

"?"

And she kissed him.

Surprisingly, it was in a place he could not have seen even with his eyes open: the eyelid.

He felt a light sucking sensation on his eye.

Her glasses tapped against his forehead through the bandanna.

Naturally, neither of them said anything. Enough time passed for a few breaths, but neither of them took a single one.

After that span of time that felt both long and short, she removed her lips.

She embraced him and he kept his eyes closed.

But a slight impatience filled him and he reached for her butt to change the mood.

Normally, she would have moved out of the way and lightly scolded him.

If she would escape here, he could laugh it all off, but…

"Ah."

She let out a quiet voice and permitted his touch.

With the slight sound of rustling clothes, she lifted her feet from the veranda and snuggled up next to him.

She pressed against him.

Shoui's heart skipped a beat and he reflexively opened his eyes to look up at Yuuki.

She looked down at him with the moonlight behind her.

Her face was still nearly emotionless and she spoke the first words that came to mind.

“You don’t want to?”

He reflexively sat up and scratched his head.

“Eh? Um, well, how should I put it?”

“You really are stupid. …I prepared myself for a lot when I agreed to be Koto’s Guardian and Chancellor.”

“…Even for placing yourself in a position where you could kill people?”

“Even if I do, I won’t change.”

“Really?”

“Even if I kill someone, I will still be me.”

As soon as she said that, a sudden raindrop fell on his cheek.

…!?

The raindrop had not fallen from the sky.

It had come from Yuuki’s eye.

She was shedding tears from her usual expressionless face.

“!”

The second he saw the tears dripping down her cheeks, he realized that all of his thoughts had been wrong.

He sat the rest of the way up and faced her.

"…? Shoui-kun?"

He shook his head.

"I just about let an older girl trick me."

"Eh?"

"You're afraid, aren't you? You're afraid of your current situation and that you might change."

"I am not-…"

"You have to be. Everything you just said was a lie, wasn't it?"

He embraced her and removed her glasses.

She closed her eyes as if to keep him from seeing them, so he kissed her eyelid.

"…Ah."

He heard her quiet voice and tasted some slight saltiness on his tongue.

He sensed that undeniable flavor.

"It tastes a lot like blood…"

His casual comment seemed to act as a signal.

She lowered her head in his arms and she began to cry. She suppressed her voice and her shoulders shook.

She silently shed tears.

Shoui held her shaking shoulders and sighed.

“You’ve always been stupid… You have a bad habit of putting on an act and trying to solve everything yourself.”

“…”

“Were you trying to escape the unease by sleeping with me? …Does your current position scare you that much?”

She raised her head and her expression left him speechless.

The ends of her eyebrows were lowered in the first look of anguish he had ever seen from her.

“Yuuki?”

He quickly pulled her from his body.

Their movements while pressed together had nearly pulled her shrine maiden outfit from her shoulders.

“Nn?”

She sniffed once to suppress the tears and wiped at her eyes.

The tears vanished, but the expression did not. She held that silent anguish inside and asked a question.

“…What’s the matter?”

Shoui realized his eyes were fixated on her face.

“Oh, um…”

He quickly began to pull his bandanna down.

“You don’t want to?”

But those words stopped him.

He saw a smile on her face and she continued without the smile crumbling.

“You don’t want to spend some of your time on me?”

“…Can’t we keep things the way they were? Doing this kind of thing to make up for your fear isn’t-…”

She cut him off with a quiet voice.

“Can’t you tell I’m blushing?”

With that question, she let her clothing drop from her shoulders.

With a soft sound, the clothing fell away like a blooming flower.

She gathered the clothing around her chest to hide her exposed skin, but she faced Shoui with a bold look in her eyes.

“If something happens, will you…?”

“Will I?”

“Will you protect me from myself?”

He knew what she meant by that.

If she were to harm someone else, she would be harming herself too.

And to protect her from herself, he would need to be by her side at all times.

He suddenly recalled her Words.

The winter cries out frigidly

Someone cries in loneliness

They speak words yet nothing is said

They speak Words yet nothing is said

They simply wait for the ice to melt

They draw near and never give up

He nodded but still felt hesitant as he spoke.

“It’s really not fair to show me the prize in advance…”

She narrowed her eyes and smiled.

“Don’t act like you haven’t wanted to see this for a long time.”

Hearing that, he sighed and gave up.

From then on, she had occasionally visited him at night. It had always been on the nights when she left without him to complete a job outside Nandaimon.

It had all happened long ago, but it had made Shoui who he was today.

Part 4

7:27 PM

In the present, Shoui looked up at the moon in the night sky and sighed.

…Is she who she is now because I didn’t protect her?

He could not answer that question.

He could think of plenty of causes.

He had let her kill someone.

He had not been able to stop her from being hurt.

He had gone to the Mountain without telling her anything.

He had spent two years on meaningless training without contacting her.

And most importantly…

“Even after that training, I’m not a Chancellor and I couldn’t reach the same level as her.”

He got up and walked to the metal fence on the edge of the roof. The wind blowing up along the dormitory wall was powerful.

He could see the schoolyard and the giant school building silently rising five stories into the night.

The schoolyard had pockmark-like holes dug here and there.

However, there was a pattern to the pockmarks. Those dots drew a giant circle with a few more dots drew lines from the center to the cardinal directions.

Word Accelerator Ixolde was buried below there.

That giant double helix word accelerator was buried two hundred meters belowground.

It would create a Rhythm with a Tempo faster than any existing Rhythm could hope to have.

“They claim that Rhythm will be presented to the Mountain, but who knows what will happen.”

With those words, he turned his back on the schoolyard.

The wind hit his back.

…What am I supposed to do now?

As soon as he thought that, he realized someone was standing in front of him.

“!?”

He put up his guard on reflex and heard a voice.

“Hey, are you the only one here?”

Shoui realized who it was.

“Oh, Saki-san.”

He stood up and took three steps back.

He was keeping his distance.

When Saki realized what Shoui was doing, he silently pulled out his spear and held it at the ready.

“Why are you running away? …And more importantly, what were you doing up on the roof?”

“Eh? Well… Um, I was doing a bit of combat training and then some thinking.”

“…Combat training?”

“I know that look. You don’t believe me, do you? That’s not very nice of you.”

“No, it isn’t that.”

“If my stomps were making a racket down below, I apologize. That might have been loud.”

“Yeah, I’m here because we got some complaints about that.” Saki sighed. “Well, I also used to cause a lot of noise training here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and so did Nanba Souichirou who’s Chancellor now. Back when he hadn’t fought that ogre and had all his limbs, he would train here every night like you were.”

“How do you know that? Are you an obsessed fan or something?”

“Don’t be stupid. As the 1st Special Duty Officer, I’m in charge of intelligence. Besides, Souichirou and I are from the same year.”

Saki held up the black leather attaché case in the opposite hand from his spear.

The words “For the 1st Special Duty Officer Only” were printed on it in gold.

“Two years ago, there was a malfunction during Ixolde’s test activation being held in the schoolyard in front of you. So many Lives were disturbed that an ogre was born in Osaka.”

“I heard about that while I was at the Mountain.”

“That ogre lived in the mountains of Sakai and ate people’s Lives, so Souichirou – whose family, by the way, is descended from Ogre-Buster Watanabe no Tsuna – fought the ogre with his Modified Purple Electricity Style of Dance Combat and his Kusanagi Rhythm.”

“And during their second fight, Nanba Souichirou won in exchange for losing the use of his arms and legs, right?”

“Yes. Ever since that victory, we stopped gathering here.”

“Because it reminds you of a time when none of you had been hurt?”

“None of your business, moron.”

Saki laughed quietly after that.

And…

“You want to pick up where we left off?”

He pointed his spear toward Shoui.

The moonlight reflected dully from the blade and Shoui took a few steps back.

“W-wait juuust a second. …Sorry, though.”

“What is it?”

“You seem to think my lack of Words is a wonderful little threat, but why exactly?”

“Do you think you’re in any position to order me around?”

“Ah, why do adults always dodge the issue like that?”

“Don’t be stupid. There’s a reason I can’t tell you. A good reason.”

“A reason?”

Saki nodded and looked down at the attaché case in his left hand.

And…

“Since I doubt you’ll accept that, I’ll give you a simple explanation. Ever since a certain incident, the 1st Special Duty Officer of Osaka’s Chancellor Officers has been told to be cautious of any Dis-Worder that approaches us.”

“A certain incident?”

“Yes, but I can’t get into the details.”

“W-wait a second. Um…are you saying your issue with me is based on something like a prophecy!?”

Shoui was answered by Words.

Saki crossed his arms as if to better hold the attaché case as he began his recitation.

Companions vanish

Even he vanishes

She too vanishes

A hand that can hold onto no one remains

A hand that fosters destruction remains

That hand pleads for no one to leave

Saki spoke to Shoui with his arms still crossed.

“Once, there was a boy who had no Words. After he and his girl saw some cherry blossoms blossoming in winter, he brought misfortune to Osaka and died. The 1st Special Duty Officer at the time was his friend. …The first page of the history notebook inside this case

contains that Officer's altered Words after seeing it all through to the end."

"Those are some harsh Words…"

"Really? I don't think so."

"But doesn't 'pleading for no one to leave' sound like he isn't letting their spirits rest in peace?"

After saying that, Shoui realized what the Words meant.

"He's asking them to stay by his side even after they've died?"

"Interpret it however you want. I can't get into the details, but your situation is awfully like that boy's."

"You mean bringing damage to his surroundings, dying…and filling someone with sorrow?"

Saki did not nod. He simply looked Shoui in the eye.

His silence seemed to be pressing Shoui to make a decision.

He kept his spear at the ready so he could act at any moment.

But…

—Shoui – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Sense Danger – Hit!

—Saki – Hear Tech – Auto-Take – Sense Danger – Hit!

"…!?"

They heard a scream.

It came from the dormitory directly below.

The two of them exchanged a glance.

“Gwaaaaah!”

They heard that shout and the shattering of glass from downstairs, but then the noise vanished.

“Saki-san!?” / “…What is going on!?”

By the time they yelled, they were already on the move.

They were running toward the stairs down from the roof.

Something was happening downstairs.

Most likely, it was a fight.

Chapter 7: Trembling in Fear (Vs. Human Instructions)

Part 1

7:46 PM

Shoui and Saki ran down the stairs from the roof to the first floor.

"What the hell!?"

The first thing they saw were collapsed students filling the hallway that cut east to west across the student dorm's first floor.

The hundred meter linoleum floor was covered in people wearing the gray uniform of Osaka Prefectural #2.

There were at least one hundred of them.

Most of them held weapons and wore armor and they lay unconscious on the floor with no noticeable injuries.

"What in the world happened?"

—Shoui – Medical Tech – Take – Identity Injuries – Hit.

"They were kicked."

"…? You can tell?"

"I saw this a lot when I used to do karate. You can tell they took a hit to the jaw from the angle of their neck. See?"

—Saki – Medical Tech – Take – Identify Injuries – Miss.

“I can’t really tell. But the problem is that this was done by a single person.”

“It looks that way to you too, Saki-san? You think one person did all this?”

Shoui looked around the hallway.

“Come to think of it, what are the defenses like here? Even if it isn’t Nandaimon class, shouldn’t the automatic defenses react to an intruder?”

Saki looked to one corner of the ceiling.

There was a television camera there, but its power light was off.

“This isn’t good. That’s supposed to be connected to the Chancellor’s Officers HQ out back.”

Shoui nodded and looked to the collapsed students.

He recognized a few he had met over the past few days.

He had taken classes with them during the day.

He then looked to the doors lining the hallway.

They were all open, so everyone had come out to challenge the enemy.

“I can’t believe this. Should I revive them all?”

“Finding the enemy comes first. …Can anyone move!? Someone who knows where the enemy went!”

Someone responded to Saki's shout.

"Your enemy hasn't run away, idiot. He's right here."

It was a male voice and it came from the stairway on the left that Saki and Shoui had descended.

The two boys looked over in surprise and found the enemy there.

Part 2

7:48 PM

A boy in a red mountain hoodie stood high up on the stairway landing.

He brushed up his straight, short-cropped hair as he looked down at Shoui and Saki.

"So you had some forces left over, did you?"

The first to react was Shoui, not Saki.

He took a slow half-step forward. He did not put up his guard and remained in a natural stance.

"Um, excuse me. I'm a normal student, so can I just leave? …Gwoh! S-Saki-san!?"

Shoui shouted in protest at the kick from the side and Saki glared at him.

"Get outta here, moron! And…hey, you! Who the hell are you!? Answer me!"

“You really do love your boke and tsukkomi routine in Osaka, don’t you?”

“Answer the question I asked!”

“Shut up. You’re the one that needs to answer my question. Has Osaka’s Chancellor still not come back?”

Saki’s expression shifted from tense to grim when he heard that.

“Damn you…”

“Hey, you up there! I wouldn’t anger Saki-san if I were you. His special attack is to gang up on you with his friends.”

Shoui ducked to avoid the backhand punch Saki threw his way, so Saki glanced back at him.

“Why would you dodge that?”

“The rules of boke and tsukkomi have nothing to do with this. Oh, and pay attention.”

The enemy walked down one step.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

The enemy gave off no killer intent.

That meant one of two things.

One: the enemy was not taking this seriously yet.

Two: the enemy was maintaining a natural stance.

Shoui chose the latter, so he gave a shout.

“Hold it!”

“…?”

Once the enemy reached the third step down, Shoui saw him stop.

Saki gave Shoui a puzzled look from the side, but he did not care.

He simply asked a question of the enemy who stood higher up from him.

“Are you here to pick a fight with Osaka’s Chancellor?”

“Of course. Besides, after going this far, the Chancellor’s really the only one left.”

Saki stepped forward when he heard that.

He pulled out two spears and held one at the ready in each hand.

“You mean you defeated all the guards!? You defeated Vice Chancellor Hirano and the Special Duty Officers!?”

“Yeah, they were quite brave. My officers grew defiant and refused to cross the Altered Line, so they could learn a thing from yours.”

“Cross the Altered Line?”

“Yes, I’m saying I crossed Nagoya’s ultra-dangerous desert region created when the word structure was destroyed by the nuclear syllable bomb dropped during the Kinki Riot thirteen years ago.”

“…”

“Do you understand what that means?”

“If that’s true, this is no joke!”

“Why would it be a joke?” The enemy sat down on the stairs. “Well, if Osaka’s Chancellor hasn’t shown up after all this, maybe he was already taken out.”

“What?”

“This place seems pretty shorthanded, but that’s because something happened in the city, isn’t it? …My companions picked a fight with Osaka’s and Nagoya’s Chancellors.”

“Is that true, Saki-san?”

Saki answered Shoui’s question without nodding.

“I was #2 for tonight, but I’d heard there was an Alert Level C commotion earlier.”

“Have you heard whether the Chancellors are okay?”

“The Souichirou I know would never lose to anyone with his Kusanagi. …What about you, Hizaka?”

“The boss I know would never lose to anyone with her breast size. …No, wait. I think Yuuki’s are bigger.”

“I really am going to kill you later.”

“That probably isn’t happening. After all, I’m going to knock both of you out right here,” calmly commented the enemy up the stairs. “I really don’t care either way when it comes to Osaka’s power. Ever since the Kinki Riot, we’ve researched techniques to defeat the Rhythms and Techs you primarily use here.”

Before he even finished, Saki silently lowered his body.

And a moment later…

—Saki – Spear/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Throw Left and Right Spears – Hit!

He stretched upwards and his two spears flew in a straight line.

The twin lines tore through the wind on their way to the person sitting on the stairs.

With two solid sounds, the spears stabbed into the edge of the concrete stairs.

Their shafts vibrated, but they had not pierced anything.

The enemy had stood up at some point.

He was turned to the side on the steps and the spear shafts filled the space just barely past his chest and back.

"That was close."

His voice contained no hint of panic, tension, or killer intent.

Shoui frowned.

…That wasn't trying to hit?

It had looked like Saki had thrown the spears as a threat to restrict the enemy's movement.

Wondering why, he glanced over at Saki, but the slight smile on Saki's face and the sweat on his brow told Shoui he had been wrong.

…He tried to hit, but didn't?

The enemy had dodged Saki's spears.

And without using a Tech.

"I can't believe this," said the enemy. "And I haven't even met my sister or her lover yet."

Hearing a slight laugh, Shoui looked up at the enemy.

The boy was smiling as he stood between the two spears.

"Didn't I tell you? No Rhythm or Tech will work on me."

Without saying a word, Saki pulled out two more spears and held them at the ready.

…Saki-san?

Just as Shoui was going to say something, Saki took action.

—Saki – Spear/Gym/Draw Tech – Multi-Take – Throw Left and Right Spears – Hit!

His actions were perfectly flowing and swift.

If the previous spears marked the ends of a horizontal line, these two marked the ends of a vertical line.

They were aimed at the chest and waist of the boy standing between those other spears.

But…

"Don't hold back. You need to aim for my face. C'mon, the face."

With that comment, the enemy made his move.

Shoui watched as the boy avoided the supposedly unavoidable attack.

He stepped toward the tips of the spears flying his way.

He started down the stairs at a walking pace.

Just before the flying spears were going to hit him, he had moved outside the range of the spears on his left and right.

It was impossible.

The spears were flying faster than he was walking.

…He couldn't possibly have moved forward before he was skewered.

But he had done exactly that to dodge.

With two solid sounds, the spears stabbed into the edge of the concrete stairs.

The vibrating shafts of the four spears now marked the ends of a cross.

The enemy did not stop walking in front of that geometric diagram.

He continued down the stairs.

He showed no tension, hesitation, or killer intent.

Shoui instinctually took a step back and glanced over to Saki.

The tall spear-user watched his opponent with a smile still plastered on his face.

There was brightness to his expression, much like the surprise of suddenly waking up.

“Let me guess. That’s Zenon’s paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise, isn’t it?”

“So you figured it out?” confirmed the enemy without stopping his descent of the stairs.

Shoui gave Saki a confused look.

“…?”

“It’s a paradox from the heretical Zenon school of Western wordology. No matter how fast someone is, it still takes some time to arrive at a destination.”

The enemy picked up where Saki left off.

“Even movement on a microscopic scale requires some slight time. Using that theory, units of distance can be divided nearly infinitely, right? In other words, motion takes a nearly infinite amount of time.”

“He dodged using that paradox?”

“Of course he did! He’s from the Zenon City! …You’re from Tokyo, aren’t you!?” shouted Saki. “You’re Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide, aren’t you!?”

“Correct.”

The enemy, Nakamura Hisahide, reached the bottom of the stairs as he spoke that word.

His gaze was three sizes lower than Saki's and one higher than Shoui's.

He pulled his hands from his pockets and let them dangle at his sides.

He gently raised his right hand and looked at the silver ring on his middle finger.

"Of course, the theory I'm using isn't quite that well put together. It's just the persuasion I need to activate my power. It's something like what they call an Override in England."

With that, his right toes spun like a top on the floor and his left leg raced out in a straight line.

—Saki – Boxing/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Guard – Hit!

But for some reason, Hisahide's toes stabbed into Saki's side before he could guard.

"Saki-san!"

By the time Shoui shouted his name, Saki's feet had already left the floor.

Part 3

7:59 PM

Shoui caught Saki's airborne body.

"Are you okay!?"

“He was probably knocked out. I heard something cracking inside him,” lightly commented Hisahide as he pulled his leg back with a compact motion. “I just hope it wasn’t a bone.”

“How irresponsible can you be?”

Shoui supported the taller boy with his shoulder.

In that moment, he heard a quiet voice.

“Hisaka.”

It was Saki’s voice. He was using a Tech to speak remotely.

…!?

“Don’t move. He’ll notice. He’s probably feeling pretty full of himself even though he only broke a spare spear.”

Saki’s hand tapped Shoui on the back.

“I know this is selfish, but buy me some time so I can escape.”

“…?”

“That was enough for me to know I can’t win this. I’ll run to the nearest guard station and get the security system back up and running.”

He took a breath.

“The cameras will at least capture him and the automatic defenses might even blow him away.”

As he listened to Saki, Shoui glanced over at Hisahide.

—Shoui – Mind/Sight Tech – Multi-Take – Analyze Mind – Hit!

…Doesn't look like he's noticed. So what should I do!?

The enemy gave him the answer he needed.

Hisahide took a step forward.

Shoui fled on reflex. As Hisahide charged in from straight ahead, he escaped to the side.

He ran into the dorm room to his right.

"You're running!?"

Hisahide's shout was cut off by the sound of the slamming door.

Shoui locked the door behind him and shoved Saki toward the window.

Saki looked back for just a moment.

"Hizaka!?"

"Get going!"

Saki did not reply or ask anything more.

His nod was all the answer he needed.

His tall form left the window and vanished into the darkness.

Shoui remained in the silent space.

He started breathing a sigh of relief at the fact that his split-second decision had worked and at the sudden change of scenery.

But then he slapped his cheeks.

The distinct sound woke him up, so he placed one foot out front and stood in front of the door.

…How is he going to come in?

The enemy had no weapon, but he had the kicking technique that had sent Saki flying, a strange evasive method, and absolute confidence.

That thought brought unease to Shoui's heart, but…

"I'm going to protect Yuuki, aren't I?"

So he had to ask this boy who had come to attack Kansai whether he was prepared to defeat Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

"…" He lowered his hips and held his right arm at waist height. His target was the wooden door.

Nakamura Hisahide had to be on the other side.

In the instant the boy started to open the door, Shoui would blow the door away to catch him off guard.

He would need to time this perfectly. He could not surprise his opponent without attacking just before the door opened.

Shoui thought about that opponent.

…Because I don't have Words of my own, I can sense my opponent's will, huh?

"Old Lady Senga used to say that all the time."

He closed his eyes, read his opponent's presence, and then predicted that opponent's actions.

…Twenty-two seconds have passed since I shut this door.

That was a long time and his opponent had been waiting silently the entire time.

Shoui thought about how long he needed to hide here.

And…

"!"

He opened his eyes and he began to move.

—Shoui – Boxing/Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Destroy Object – Hit!

A Rhythm would give away his presence, so he did not use one.

He simply stepped straight forward.

It was a quick movement.

He simultaneously stomped his foot and thrust out the heel of his right palm.

The sound of the stomp reverberated around him.

A blow struck the center of the wooden door.

The door bent as the sound of impact rang out.

In that instant, he mentally pictured what he needed to do next.

Whether Hisahide had dodged or was caught in the destruction of the door, Shoui would grab the collar of his mountain hoodie.

Once he grabbed it, the boy could no longer dodge.

His thoughts arrived there in an instant.

In a span of time so small it went out several digits past the decimal point, a strange recoil reached Shoui's hand.

The bending of the wood vanished.

…He pushed it back!?

His thought was cut off by a sound much like a crack of thunder.

The door had been split apart.

Instead of flying outward or breaking inward, the wooden door split in two and flew to either side.

"…!?"

As Shoui wondered what had happened, something touched the heel his outstretched right hand's palm.

It was a slightly heated flat surface that felt both hard and springy.

It was the sole of a shoe.

"Wha-…!?"

Nakamura Hisahide stood before him after throwing a forward kick.

The sole of his raised right foot was in the exact same position as the heel of Shoui's palm.

They had apparently both been thinking the exact same thing.

"Interesting," said Hisahide as he lowered his leg. "Your fist can negate my kick through a door, can it?"

Their gazes clashed with a slight height difference.

Shoui's plans for the fight fragilely crumbled in his mind.

Part 4

8:02 PM

Hisahide moved swiftly after stepping inside the room.

First, he sent a right kick toward Shoui's gut.

—Shoui –Dodge Tech – Take – Dodge – Hit!

But he could not dodge it.

The blow audibly hit his solar plexus and brought him to the limits of his endurance.

His knees unexpectedly gave out.

“!”

As he tilted forward and nearly fell over, Nakamura’s kicking leg came into view.

The foot wore basketball shoes, but it was the opposite foot from the one that had kicked Shoui in the gut.

…Just how fast can he kick!?

Before he could feel any surprise, Hisahide’s toes slammed into Shoui’s face from below.

Shoui no longer felt any pain. A strange floating sensation ruled his mind.

“!?”

Hisahide was not done attacking.

After swinging his left leg straight up, he swung it straight back down.

And that dropped his heel onto Shoui’s collapsing head.

“This might just cause the first death!”

Shoui’s foggy mind was more focused on his enemy’s raised leg than his shout. That leg brought on an odd sense of déjà vu.

His forehead started aching.

It was a heated pain as if from a slash.

…What!?

With a great weight, the pain returned to his forehead.

The pain somewhat brought him back to his senses, so he desperately tried to avoid the danger.

—Shoui –Dodge Tech – Take – Dodge – Hit!

But that technique did not work on Hisahide.

The boy swung down his leg and Shoui realized where the sense of déjà vu came from.

"Two years ago…"

On the night Yuuki had killed someone, he had received a similar attack and lost consciousness.

That nightmare was repeating itself.

He could not avoid it.

The powerful kick knocked Shoui to the floor.

The pain of the blow was joined by the sensation of blood spraying from his forehead.

"!"

Instead of a scream, a thought raced through his mind.

…Am I going to lose and accomplish nothing yet again?

He could not even check to see whether Yuuki was in danger or not.

The word "powerless" came to mind as he lost consciousness.

He heard sirens, but they were so distant that he thought he was imagining them.

Chapter 8: New Words (Special Moves of Each Character) - (12/19/1996)

Part 1

4:36 AM

Before sunrise, the early winter morning was indistinguishable from night.

Wind blew through the Koto region.

It was a wintery north wind.

The wind raced through the basin-like Koto plateau and cleansed the air of the night. As the process repeated, the air of the winter night became that of morning.

The wind blew from north to south, pushing the night air south.

That wind moved toward Nara Station to the south of the Koto region. It was a single-story train station, but it was large enough for limited express trains to stop at.

This early in the morning, the platform had only just opened for business. The lights were on, but no one was there.

The people were all gathered at another part of the station: the ticket gate.

About ten station attendants had gathered at the ticket gate despite the chilly north wind.

They wore the blue uniforms of the national railway, three of them were positioned inside the station, and the rest were placed outside. Based on the weapons they held, they were apparently making sure someone could not leave the station.

Their gazes were fixated on a man standing in front of the ticket gate.

The short man was dressed like a Buddhist monk.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties and he had strangely straightforward eyes.

Instead of a shaved head, he had short hair.

A red basketball bag hung from his shoulder and he wore basketball shoes on his feet.

Only his clothing and face looked anything like a monk.

He looked up at the three station attendants directly in front of him who were much older than him.

He looked straight ahead to the station master who had some white hair on his chin.

“I would rather not hit an old man. Move out of the way.”

Each word was well-enunciated and quickly spoken.

The station master cleared his throat and answered.

“Unfortunately, Iba-sama, a few organizations have – and I’m sorry to say this – requested that you be returned to Tokyo.”

“Organizations? You mean the Emergency Teachers and the Mountain?”

“I cannot say.”

“What will happen if I do pass through here?”

“Those waiting behind us will hit the emergency switch and the railroad police will rush here.”

“Why haven’t you already called the police?”

“If we do that, people will question the safety of our station. As a tourist-focused station, the police are an unwelcome presence.”

“A wise decision.”

The man named Iba stopped asking questions and the station master bowed toward him.

“I apologize, but if possible could you leave the Koto region and enter through a different route?”

“I cannot do that.”

“Why not?”

“I came here for my own objective. I have done nothing wrong.” Iba then asked another question. “Will you let me through?”

None of them answered his straightforward question, so he said more.

“Then how about this? You detained me here, but I escaped before the police could arrive.”

“We can’t do that. The request we received contained a certain statement.”

“What request?”

“We were told we must not allow you through here and that you must pass through here.”

“That is contradictory.”

“Indeed it is.”

“Now, let me tell you what that statement you mentioned was.”

The station master fell silent at that.

The one who spoke instead was of course Iba.

“Did it say my presence carried the risk of another Kinki Riot?”

As soon as he said that, someone behind the station master rushed forward to attack Iba.

—Iba – Savate/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Jumping Dodge – Hit!

“Oh?”

Iba evaded the attack with a tone of slight surprise.

A station attendant stood before him with headphones in his ears and a sword in his hand.

He was one of those who had been waiting behind the station master.

Even through his blue uniform, Iba could easily imagine the powerful body below.

He rested the sword on his left shoulder.

“Nijou Makoto. My Dance Combat is the Youmon Nijou style.”

“Nijou of Youmon? You were the Koto Chancellor nine years ago, weren’t you?”

The man named Nijou nodded at Iba’s comment. The square face below his hat contained a slight smile.

“I’ve heard the name Iba. …You were Osaka’s 1st Special Duty Officer who stood between Osaka Chancellor Kuki Udai and Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Midori during the Kinki Riot.”

“…”

“I thought you’d gone missing in the Tochigi mountains along with the two Chancellors, but are you working as a Mountain instructor in the Tokyo region?”

“Ask any more and this will develop into a fight.”

Nijou smiled bitterly at Iba’s expressionless tone.

“That’s why I came out here in the first place.”

“So if you are going to call the railroad police anyway, you might as well do what you can before then?”

Iba glanced over at the station master.

“It may be a bit extreme, but a wise decision all the same.”

The station master did not reply and looked to Nijou.

And…

“Don’t hold back.”

“He is already holding back a fair bit,” replied Iba.

Ibe held out a hand to stop Nijou from swinging the sword on his shoulder and stared straight at the man.

“You seem to have gone soft during your nine years away from the front lines. Your primary weapon is not the sword.”

—Nijou – Mind Tech – Take – Prevent Disturbance – Miss.

“…What makes you say that?”

“Your previous slash was shifted slightly to the right. Even if you are right handed, no swordsman would do that.”

“I see!”

Nijou used his empty right hand to pull a bullpup SMG from his pocket. It had the characteristic white plastic body of the Izumo Company and a larger caliber than one would ever imagine from how light it looked.

It fired normal bullets, but Nijou sang his Words as he fired them.

The words I send out carry the weight of metal

The body that receives them carries the pain of metal

It is all supported by the power of metal

The words and the attack both lasted only an instant.

—Nijou – Shot/Metal High Rhythm – Multi-Take – Ether Rapid Fire – Hit!

Ether enveloped the eight fired bullets and they transformed into long metal spears.

They would cause far more than injuries if they hit, but Iba did not use any kind of Tech.

He did not dodge.

“Hit him!”

As soon as Nijou yelled, the eight metal spears touched Iba’s body and were deflected with a metallic noise.

“…!?”

Iba ran while ignoring the confused voices coming from Nijou and the rest.

He ran straight forward.

He was moving right up to Nijou, but he still did not use a Tech.

Nijou pulled the trigger of his SMG.

He did not hesitate to fire straight ahead at Iba’s face.

—Nijou – Shot/Metal High Rhythm – Multi-Take – Ether Rapid Fire – Hit!

Metal spears were fired once more.

Iba only held his hand straight forward as he ran.

The metal spears were deflected every which way by that hand. They stabbed into the station platform or roof, but not even one stabbed into Iba.

"…!"

Nijou threw aside his SMG and jumped backwards.

As Iba continued toward him, Nijou moved forward for his own attack. Jumping back had been a feint.

—Nijou – Sword/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Intercept – Hit!

But Iba slipped past Nijou's sword and right up to the man.

"…What!?"

Iba answered Nijou's question through actions.

His right heel stomped on Nijou's right knee.

With a dull sound, Nijou's knee bent at an odd angle and his body collapsed.

"I must compliment your willingness to aim for the face. As a student, I would have lost."

As Nijou collapsed, Iba thrust the heel of his palm up into the man's jaw at a diagonal angle.

"But that was thirteen years ago."

The blow landed and Nijou's face turned upwards.

The battle was over.

Part 2

7:30 AM

Shoui came to shortly after sunrise.

The first sensation was that of lying down.

He opened his eyes to find a large white ceiling filling his blurry vision.

…*A hallway?*

That was his first thought when he saw how large the ceiling was and he moved just his head to look around.

He was in a lobby. To his right was a counter built into the wall.

The counter was closed off by a curtain and a few labels were displayed on the wall.

…*Reception, New Patients, Outpatient, and Accounting.*

After reading those labels, Shoui finally realized where he was: Osaka Central Hospital.

"!?"

He shot up in surprise.

…*Why am I sleeping in the hospital lobby?*

That question brought back the memories of the previous night.

He had met Saki on the rooftop and Tokyo's Chancellor in the dorm.

Then he had fought that second boy.

But that final scene did not lead into this one.

…I faced him in a room…?

What had happened after that?

He could not answer.

His forehead briefly hurt, but he ignored it and looked around to check on the situation.

A student was lying in each of the sofas lined up in the lobby.

They were lying on the floor as well. A few were receiving an IV.

This was a war wound hospital.

Anyone who had experienced the Kinki Riot thirteen years before was familiar with that term.

Every hospital in Osaka had once worked at full capacity with the injured filing the lobby and hallways.

…I can't believe this.

That thought brought more pain to his forehead.

He reflexively brought a hand to it and felt cloth there.

…My bandanna.

After that thought of confirmation, the pain receded.

He sighed, got up, and put on the shoes placed next to the sofa.

As he did, he remembered what he had wanted to do the previous night.

He had wanted to ask Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide if he intended to attack Koto Chancellor Yuuki Yuuki.

That would have let him protect Yuuki, but he had not received an answer.

…This isn't good.

He glanced at the clock and found it was not much past 7:30.

However, at least ten hours had passed since the previous night's tragedy.

That was plenty of time for that boy to attack Koto.

…I need to find out.

A payphone was located by the mirror on the wall next to the counter.

He took his wallet from his uniform's hidden pants pocket and pulled out his telephone card.

…I need to ask if Yuuki knows about this.

He picked up the receiver and searched his memories from two years ago to place the call.

He also had to ask if Tokyo's Chancellor had visited Yuuki.

He had to ask if she knew if Tokyo's Chancellor was after her as the Killing Holder.

He had to ask if she knew about what had happened at the student dorm the night before.

He had to ask about it all and tell her about it all.

A thought filled his chest during the short time it took him to dial the number.

…She isn't going to ignore me about this, is she?

He recalled the night before last.

He recalled the term Killing Holder.

Killing Holder referred to someone who held the will to kill inside themselves and would not hesitate to kill.

Yuuki had earned that Urban Name during the two years he had been gone.

…I guess she isn't going to cry and say she wants me to protect her anymore.

The phone rang.

He realized he was holding his breath.

There was something he wanted to ask.

He wanted to ask it far more then about the previous night or about Tokyo's Chancellor.

…Is there any meaning in protecting Yuuki now?

He had wondered that ever since descending from the Mountain.

Asking that question threatened to destroy everything, even his promise on that night three years ago.

"…"

The phone continued to ring.

Unable to bear it any longer, he just about hung up, but then they answered.

"This is the Yuuki family of the Nandaimon Shrine. …Who is it?"

It was Yuuki's voice.

Shoui adjusted his grip on the receiver.

He knew what he had to say first: a greeting.

…Chancy seeing you here.

He shook his head to erase that thought and gave a quick sigh.

He quietly cleared his throat, and…

"It's Shoui," he said.

Or so he thought he said.

However, Yuuki gave the following reply:

"…Who is it?"

For a brief moment, he had no idea what she was saying.

She sounded just like she was speaking to a complete stranger.

…Has she forgotten me?!

"It's Shoui! Can't you hear me!?"

Only after saying that did he realize why she had ignored him.

"…!?"

He had not actually spoken.

“Why aren’t you saying anything? Hurry it up already.”

He heard Yuuki’s voice and tried to say something, but…

“…Ah.”

Only a rough breath escaped his throat.

He quickly brought a hand to his throat and found bandages wrapped around it.

“…”

He thought back to the previous night while Yuuki fell silent.

He had fought Tokyo’s Chancellor…

…And took a kick to the throat.

His vocal cords had been crushed.

He could not speak.

“Who is this?” asked Yuuki.

“It’s Shoui!”

Even his shout only created a slight disturbance in his breathing.

He could not get anything through to her.

He could not ask any of the questions he wanted to ask her.

“Yuuki!”

The abnormal breath that should have been her name spilled from his throat.

A moment later, she hung up.

“!”

On reflex, he prepared to punch the wall.

—Shoui – Mind/Boxing Tech – Multi-Take – Restraint – Hit!

He stopped his fist right before it reached the white wall.

He dropped the receiver that only produced a dial tone.

He was breathing heavily.

He touched his throat and found the bandages there.

He grabbed the cloth in his fingers and quickly unraveled them.

After throwing the bandages and the compress to the floor, he tried to speak.

“…!”

Nothing came out.

He could not form any words.

He truly was a Dis-Worder, just as his Urban Name said.

“…”

He gave a deep sigh and relaxed his entire body.

He looked around and saw the many students sleeping in the lobby.

…I can't cause a commotion here.

He shoulders drooped and he placed a hand on the wall.

An unexpectedly cold sensation reached his fingers.

It felt like ice.

"?"

He turned back and saw another lobby where the wall should have been.

It was a mirror.

The large mirror on the wall reflected the lobby and Shoui.

The Shoui in the mirror was covered in bandages.

His coat and shirt had been removed and he wore bandages in place of that clothing.

He could see charms in a few of the gaps between bandages, so he must have undergone Tune healing.

Barely any pain or fatigue remained in his body.

…Huh?

He noticed a gray cloth sticking out of his front pants pocket.

It was his bandanna.

…Didn't I feel that on my head when my forehead hurt?

He had felt some cloth on his forehead.

"…"

He checked the mirror again.

A bandage was wrapped around the forehead of the Shoui in the large mirror.

The center of the bandage had grown a light reddish brown, so some blood must have seeped out below it.

That was the location of the wound Nagoya Vice Chancellor Yamashita Gihei had given him two years before.

The previous night's attack had caused that wound to bleed again.

…*Last night.*

He remembered everything when he looked at himself in the mirror.

After seeing the bruise on his throat and the blood on his forehead, the memories returned to him.

He had taken Tokyo Chancellor Nakamura Hisahide's kick to the throat and then the boy's heel to the head.

It was just like two years before, just with a heel instead of a slash.

The nightmare had replayed itself.

…*So I lost.*

That thought filled him with exhaustion.

Strength left his knees, so he pressed his shoulder against the shoulder in the mirror and crumbled to the floor.

It did not take long for him to fall asleep.

Part 3

9:22 AM

A thick curtain covered the room's large window, cutting off the outside world.

It was a twin room on the twentieth floor of the Osaka Hilton hotel.

Tokyo chancellor Nakamura Hisahide and 1st Special Duty Officer Ikemaru Takahiro were staying in the room.

The warm red cloth created a solid barrier that completely hid those two boys from the outside world.

The concepts of human presences, gazes, outside light, noise, and time did not exist in that room.

The room primarily contained darkness.

The one light destroying that darkness was a TV displaying a dark forest.

That slight light gave a vague view of the room's structure.

The TV and table could be seen as shadows.

Hisahide and Ikemaru sat at sofas surrounding the short table.

They were both looking to the dark sky, earthen ground, and forest shown on the TV screen.

It was night.

The structure of that darkness suddenly changed.

After a great shaking of the footage, the heavens and earth tilted on their side.

The camera had fallen over.

The forest footage showed a hand which lay unmoving on the ground.

Then a giant humanoid figure passed by in front of the camera. It was tall enough to surpass the trees behind it. It was over five meters tall.

A roar left the TV.

It was a bestial roar, released as the great beast passed by the camera.

“I feel bad for the collapsed cameraman.”

Legs appeared on the screen.

They were mechanical legs not wearing any shoes.

“Nanba Souichirou took prosthetic limbs after the battle that occurred prior to this footage,” said Ikemaru. “Aren’t you going to watch? The battle is starting.”

Nanba Souichirou walked across the screen wearing white burial clothes.

He walked to the back of the screen, where the giant form stood.

It resembled a human and was colored with red and black tiger stripes.

“An ogre, huh?” said Hisahide when he looked to the screen. “Kyoto’s Nandaimon apparently has the arm that was cut off here.”

“You went to see it? I can’t believe you…”

“Don’t lecture me. I was turned down by a girl, so that’s better than going to the movie theater alone, isn’t it?

“A girl…? Oh, the Koto Chancellor.” Ikemaru glanced over at Hisahide. “I thought my cousin was the only girl you would talk about.”

“To me, Takada is the same as you and Aoi. She’s more than just a girl. But, I’d heard rumors that the Koto Chancellor is a decent girl…and she’s the Killing Holder, so that’s a plus.”

“How is that a plus?”

“She’s killed someone, so she sounds stronger than me.”

“Are you really planning to do what your master told you to?”

“If I’m going to call myself the strongest, I have to be better than everyone else.”

“I hear your sister said that a lot too.”

“I live by those words. Always have.”

Ikemaru nodded.

“Look at the screen. The ogre is starting to move.”

“Every time I see this I’m amazed by how much it moves. It’s like watching an anime with a budget in the hundreds of millions.”

A black form and a white form moved around on the screen.

Souichirou's left arm was gone. He fought with his sword in his remaining right false arm.

Ikemaru crossed his arms.

"He really is intent on fighting. And after that ogre devoured the Lives of twelve people."

"Don't dodge the issue. It literally ate five people and not just their Lives."

A large motion occurred onscreen.

The giant humanoid form swung its red right arm like a bear.

In that instant, Souichirou jumped in and severed the ogre's right arm at the base.

"Here comes Kusanagi."

Souichirou swung his sword in midair.

He released his Words: "Ah."

A tearing blow struck the ogre.

It produced an explosion of wind.

The ogre as instantly knocked to the ground by the lightless and heatless explosion.

Destruction burst out, a gust of wind spread in every direction, and dust approached the camera.

After some static, there was a glimpse of the night sky and then nothing.

“Since he has Kusanagi, I doubt Osaka’s Chancellor will be the one using the strongest Rhythm,” said Hisahide as he watched the dusty screen.

“What do you mean?” asked Ikemaru.

“The Heavy Rhythm Flame High is neither a Wind Rhythm nor an Over Rhythm. Nanba Souichirou may be able to use any of the lower Wind or Over Rhythms, but there’s no chance he can use the Flame High.”

“You mean the skill needed to use Kusanagi isn’t enough to use the Flame High?”

“Even with his Modified Purple Electricity Style of Dance Combat, he only raises his power, not his skill. He’s only able to use Kusanagi.”

“He can ‘only’ use that incredible destructive power?”

“The Rhythms greater than Wind Rhythms are given names like Kusanagi, Yata, or Yakusa, but do you know what the Heavy Rhythm Flame High was called in the past?”

“?”

“Yamata.”

“…The great serpent of flames?”

“Yes. Kusanagi came from the body of Yamata…of the Kuzuryu after Susanoo defeated it.”

He smiled bitterly.

“In other words, Kusanagi was swallowed by a dragon once. It’s not that great a sword.”

Hisahide got up, grabbed the remote from the table, and turned off the TV.

Darkness filled their surroundings.

“I can’t defeat an ogre. My attack power is the same as that of a child who can’t use Rhythms.”

“But this conflict is only between people.”

“Exactly. And that makes me the strongest. When you know how it’s going to turn out, these battles are surprisingly boring.”

After that satisfied comment, Hisahide yawned.

“Takada hasn’t shown up, so I’m pretty bored. …And you’re not subordinate to me.”

“I am that girl’s servant.”

“How about you quit being her servant and be her butler? You and Aoi will be together eventually. Takada’s prophecy said so.”

A bitter laugh rang out, but it was impossible to tell which boy it came from in the darkness.

Ikemaru was the next to speak.

“You need to get to sleep. We can’t do anything if our leader is sleep deprived.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t stay up all night too. Just say you don’t want me interfering with your date.”

“It is not a date. We are shopping for a bra. A piece of the bike apparently cut the strap yesterday.”

“She doesn’t have any more with her?”

“She apparently forgot her clothes at Inuyama Station. I will be shopping for a bra and creating charms until time for today’s diversion.”

“I’m less important than a bra?”

“Not quite, no.”

Suddenly, an electronic tone came from the intercom.

“Takahiro? Are you there? How about some breakfast? Or do you want to sleep a little longer?”

Aoi’s somewhat scratchy voice came from the speaker.

“The bra is calling you, combat salaryman.”

“I prefer the term businessman. My Ikemaru family has served the emperor for generations.”

With that, Ikemaru stood up and left the room.

After the door opened and closed, only the darkness and Hisahide’s presence remained.

It did not take long for him to begin the deep breaths of sleep.

Part 4

11:16 AM

By the time the sun reached its late morning height, Osaka 1st Special Duty Officer Saki Seiji was in Nagoya.

He was not sightseeing.

He was visiting Nagoya's student hospital with Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

Specifically, they were visiting a room on the top floor of the four story building.

The label on the door gave the names Ichiyama Yuusei and Kasumi Ryuuichi.

Both were weighty names to Saki because he had heard they were powerful individuals.

"We're comin' in."

Taeko's carefree voice completely erased Saki's tension as he stepped into the hospital room.

The room was unexpectedly small.

It was utterly colorless except for the blue sky and the boxy Nagoya Tower visible out the window.

It was all white walls, white ceiling, white curtains, white beds, white blankets, and white bandages.

Ichiyama Yuusei's large body was covered in bandages on the closer bed and he sat up to look at the two visitors.

He had swapped out his combat false arms for thinner ones meant for daily life.

He had bandages around his face at forehead, nose, and chin height.

The wrinkles in the bandages moved a little and a voice came out.

"I must apologize for my shameful appearance."

"Don't worry about it. Where's Kasumi?"

"In that bed."

A blanket was wrapped around a human form on the other bed.

It did not move in the slightest even though Nagoya 1st Special Duty Officer Kasumi Ryuuichi was inside.

"After losing, he's too embarrassed to look you in the eye," explained Ichiyama as he looked over at Kasumi. "Who is that?"

"Oh, he's…"

"I am Osaka 1st Special Duty Officer Saki Seiji. On my Chancellor's orders, I am here to gather some information."

"Oh?"

—Saki – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

"Don't worry. I have no intention of doing anything to Nagoya."

"How can you prove that?"

Taeko answered that one.

“Because most of Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers were beaten down too. By a single boy.”

“Silence filled the room and Ichiyama’s expression stiffened.

“But the news this morning didn’t say anything had happened in Osaka.”

“We’re just keeping it quiet. We have some influence over the media. …The incident was contained to the school after all.”

After saying that, Saki asked a question.

“Now, I’ve given you some information, so how about you return the favor?”

“Ichiyama, tell him.”

“Well…” Ichiyama thought for a moment and asked a question. “I’d like to ask one thing. After this boy attacked you, what did he do?”

“He fought for a bit and left once our security system was back up and running. We did get him on video and my men are analyzing the footage.”

“He left, did he? I guess machines wouldn’t be easy for him since they don’t have a will of their own.”

“…What do you mean by that?”

“Have you ever heard the term White Noise?”

Saki did not answer, so Taeko asked about it.

“What’s that?”

“Occasionally, there are people who have no Words of their own. No matter what Rhythm they listen to, it doesn’t affect them.”

“Like Shoui?”

“Hizaka is different,” replied Saki. “He doesn’t have any Words, but he can use pretty much any Rhythm, can’t he?”

“A White Noise master can’t even use Techs properly.”

“So like the ancients?”

“It’s just like how you can’t cook, boss. …Gwoh!”

“…I’m impressed. Not many people could throw a wall clock at their badly injured subordinate.”

“Shut up. A moron isn’t the same as a subordinate.” She glared at the boy as she continued. “In other words, it’s someone who’s senses aren’t suited toward learnin’ Rhythms or Techs?”

“It used to be that everyone was like that.”

“Why were those ancients so strong?”

“Since they didn’t know about Rhythms and Techs, they could attack and defend from outside those things,” explained Ichiyama while holding his head after being clocked with a clock.

Saki then told him what had happened the night before.

“Zenon’s paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise. And he is from Zenon City – Tokyo. I guess that’s how he came up with his theory to reach White Noise.”

“Can you defeat him?”

“I don’t know. Besides, we don’t even know what he’s…”

Saki trailed off, but Ichiyama continued for him with a serious expression.

“I can only imagine he’s after Ixolde. Nakamura Hisahide mentioned a bond with his sister.”

“His sister? Seriously?”

“He also said he would become king. …Sadly, that’s all the information I have.”

“I see,” said Saki.

“Have ya figured somethin’ out?” asked Taeko with a puzzled look.

“Well, the Chancellor’s Officers HQ acts as a second security building and, but the computers there were left a complete mess after he attacked last night. …It’s possible he hacked in to get some information on Ixolde.”

“Oh, in that case, he probably did. This could be trouble.”

Taeko nodded and Ichiyama asked her a question.

“But…you mentioned Hizaka Shoui just now, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, the moron’s come down from the Mountain. I was plannin’ to bring him to see ya too, but he was beat up during that attack last night.”

“I managed to reboot the security system while he was being taken out,” emotionlessly said Saki.

—Ichiyama – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

—Saki – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

Ichiyama smiled bitterly.

“And what happened to him?”

“Seven blunt blows across his body, two cracked ribs, and plenty of abrasions. He’s probably sleeping at the hospital right now.”

“I see… So did he get serious?”

“Serious?”

Taeko nodded at Saki’s question.

“I doubt he did. He was probably on the receivin’ end the whole time.”

“…? What’s this about Hizaka getting serious?”

Ichiyama looked to Saki.

“I was in the West Japan Middle School Karate Championship three years ago. During the final round, I got the first hit in on my opponent’s side…and broke their ribs.”

"…I see."

"But that opponent made a miraculous comeback. Both of my false arms were destroyed and I was lying unconscious on the floor just a few minutes later."

"Are you saying Hizaka did that?"

"He passed out and was taken to the hospital afterwards, though. …I haven't met him since."

"The calmer they seem, the scarier they are when they snap," said Taeko as she stroked the Dragon Emperor's shoulder. "But…"

"?"

"Shoui is probably weaker than he was then. On a fundamental level, both in strength and skill."

"And so you don't know if he would've won that battle yesterday?"

"He couldn't have won!"

The blanket on the other bed gave a shout.

It was Kasumi.

"No matter how strong he is and even if he snaps, he can't win as long as he's using a Rhythm and Techs! Everything he does will be dodged and copied…so he'll lose!"

"Ryuuichi…"

“Boss, you wouldn’t be able to think of it like a normal fight if you’d fought them! Ichiyama! You lost to them too, so face reality! No one stands a chance!”

“Ryuuichi.”

“Answer me, Ichiyama. Tell them he can’t win!”

Ichiyama said nothing and Kasumi roared back.

“Are you afraid to admit you lost!?”

“Ryuuichi!”

Taeko’s sharp voice rang out.

—Taeko – Intimidation Tech – Take – Stop – Hit!

Kasumi’s voice stopped and silence fell.

The Dragon Emperor moved slowly so as not to interrupt that silence.

The giant metal hand lightly struck the blanket wrapped around Kasumi.

“Don’t worry. As long as I haven’t lost, Nagoya’s Chancellor’s Officers haven’t lost.”

“B-but the Student Council…is discussing whether Nagoya should surrender to Tokyo…”

“That is one way to respond, but what matters is that we survive, right?”

“…”

“Turbulent City – Nagoya is a city that desires to survive whether that means winnin’ or not. …I came here to find a method of survivin’. Not to fight and lose.”

“But if we’re going to survive, how are you going to fight, boss!?”

“Our opponent might be more powerful than me, but I have somethin’ that no one in Osaka or Tokyo has.”

“What’s that?”

“This left arm, the Eighth Dragon Emperor, and the information I can get here.”

“…”

“Work with me, Ryuuichi.”

The Dragon Emperor’s hand once more tapped the blanket surrounding Kasumi.

Soon, suppressed sobs escaped the blanket.

No one said a thing.

Saki Seiji scratched his head with the attaché case he held.

Time slowly moved toward noon.

Part 5

12:41 PM

By the time Shoui left the hospital, the sun was already approaching its afternoon angle.

…Today was the last day of the second term, but the closing ceremony is probably already over.

He was on a bus to the Chuo Ward where Osaka Prefectural #2 was, but he decided to get off in Naniwa Ward.

He walked toward Tennoji.

The Ousaka district of the Tennoji Ward was a relatively calm section of Osaka. As he walked along the hill there, he could already see the white walls of the Shitennoji that gave the Ward its name.

"That takes me back," he muttered as a scratchy sigh.

He held his throat.

…When will my voice come back?

He had no answer to that question.

At some point, he realized he had passed Shitennoji and was walking south toward Tennoji Station.

He left a residential area and entered an open commercial district.

He slowly walked down the wide stone steps giving shape to the hill and touched the white walls on either side of the hill.

…After walking to Tennoji Park, I guess I'll circle around back to the bus stop.

Just as he was silently making his plans, he heard screams.

He heard several male voices.

—Shoui – Hear Tech – Take – Determine Position – Hit.

It came from up ahead.

The slowly curving stone steps had a wall on either side, so he could not see very far ahead.

He gently continued down.

"A monster!"

With that shout, some people ran up the stairs.

It was three male students.

None of them was wearing their uniform's coat and they wore their own coats and jackets instead.

They had been skipping school.

They would normally use a harsh look to pick a fight with people, but those expressions were completely distorted at the moment.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

…They're afraid of something?

They did not answer him as they practically crawled up the stairs on all fours.

They did not so much as glance at Shoui because they were so focused on the area further down the stairs.

They seemed to be rushing, but they were not moving all that fast.

"…?"

Shoui tilted his head and one of their shoulders ran into him.

This type of student would normally use that as a pretext for a fight, but the boy said nothing.

Also, the force of the impact splattered a few drops of a liquid on Shoui's cheek.

"?"

He touched it with his hand and looked down to find his fingertips dyed slightly red.

…!?

He quickly turned around and saw quite a few bloodstains on the stone stairs.

He then noticed something odd about their clothing as they hurried up the stairs.

There were holes at the shoulders and thighs. They were giant bite marks.

…An animal!?

Confused, Shoui looked forward.

He shifted his position to peer down the curving walls.

—Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Locate Enemy – Hit.

He saw a figure standing next to the wall.

It was a human form.

A girl was pressing her back against that white wall.

The short girl had semi-long black hair and wore a stole.

She was breathing heavily with a look of fear on her face.

She was afraid.

Shoui could sense that emotion without even using a Tech, so he ran forward on reflex.

The enemy stood in front of her, hidden from view by the wall.

It was the animal which had left bite marks on those three boys.

"!"

He covered the distance in just five racing steps.

He ran in front of the wide-eyed girl, prepared to fight, and faced his opponent.

He looked in the same direction as the girl. But…

"…?"

There was nothing there.

There was only a wall in front of him.

There was no animal and none of the monsters created by a disturbance in the Lives.

There was only empty space and a wall.

…Hm? That's odd.

He glanced around, relaxed his stance, and looked back.

A girl stood by the wall.

Her eyes were unfocused and she was breathing heavily.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Shared Thoughts – Miss.

He could not tell what she was afraid of.

He could not speak and his Tech had failed, so he could only express himself through clumsy actions.

He looked her in the eye, grabbed her shoulders, and shook her a little.

"…Hh."

She gasped and a set rhythm finally returned to her breathing.

He could tell she was holding her own body in her arms below the stole.

She wanted to eliminate her trembling.

Shoui breathed a sigh of relief and recalled the past. He recalled when Yuuki had visited him that night.

…Did Yuuki want to eliminate her trembling back then?

But he smiled bitterly when he realized this was not the time to be thinking that.

The girl's breathing was still heavy, but it was not as erratic.

He looked around once more to make sure no one else was around and then nodded.

…*I guess everything's okay now.*

And as soon as he thought that…

"I guess everything's okay now."

His own voice rang in his ears.

…*Eh!?* / "Eh!?"

He turned around in surprise and his confused voice reached his ears.

However, there was no one behind him.

…*That's strange.* / "That's strange."

The voice came from his left, so he looked left.

There was no one there.

…*What is going on?* / "What is going on?"

This time, the voice came from his right.

In that instant, he used his reflexes to swipe at his right shoulder.

—Shoui – Boxing Tech – Take – Grab – Hit!

He grabbed something like a soft puffball in his left hand.

…*An animal!?* / "An animal!?"

The puffball in his left hand gave a shout.

At the same time…

“D-don’t treat him roughly! He’s taken a liking to you!”

He heard a girl’s voice and felt something press against his hands.

“…”

The girl who had looked so afraid was now reaching out her hands and gently pressing down on his hands.

The chill of the golden ring on her right hand stopped him.

She looked up at him with a somewhat pale but desperately pleading look.

However, he did notice one odd fact.

“Sorry if he scared you.”

The girl’s lips were still held somewhat tightly shut.

She was speaking with her mouth closed.

…*Eh?* / “Eh?”

His voice once more came from the puffball in his left hand and she spoke to him again without moving her mouth.

“Please let go of him. …If you don’t, I can’t guarantee what will happen.”

…*O-okay. Understood.* / “O-okay. Understood.”

He opened his left hand.

Immediately, a brown mass ran from his opened fingertips to his hand, arm, and shoulder.

“!?”

Surprised and anticipating an impact, he swung his head to the side, but the brown color hopped up from his shoulder.

As the silhouette leaped over his head, he could tell it was a small fox or rat.

“What?”

It was now directly speaking his thoughts for him.

It finally landed on his right shoulder.

He felt no impact and he turned just his head to see a creature of about fifteen centimeters.

Its body and face resembled a rat, but its coloration and tail were more like a fox.

“What…is this thing?”

The creature opened its mouth and spoke his thoughts.

“He is a Dog God.”

The answer to his question came in the girls’ voice.

She was still restraining his hands and she looked up at him with some slight fear in her eyes.

“Please do not be afraid. He has taken a liking to you.”

Her lips were not moving, but an identical creature was poking its head out from the neck of the stole placed over her shoulders.

He nimbly slipped out onto her shoulder and looked up at him.

The Dog God looked him in the eye from her shoulder.

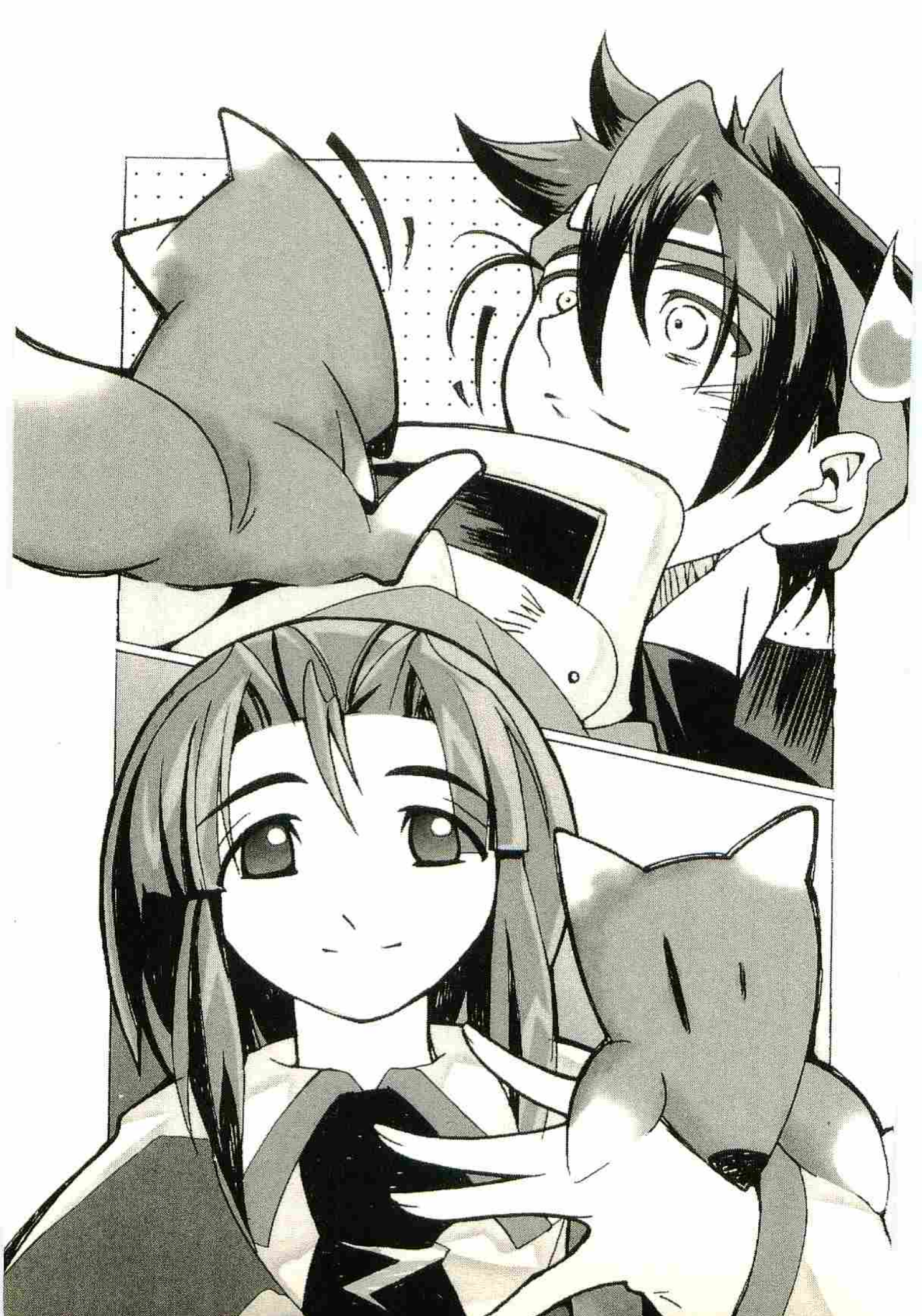
“I’m sorry for surprising you…but it’s the first time he’s taken such a liking to someone else.”

As she was speaking, another Dog God fell from the bottom of her stole.

It scrambled to its feet on the stone steps and looked up.

A moment later, about five more fell from her stole.

“Hey, stop that. Quit playing around!”



The Dog God on her shoulder shouted for her as she reached for the ones that had fallen.

The six on the ground began running around her legs as if to tease her.

…?

Once they appeared in front of her again, five of the six had vanished and just the one remained.

She grabbed the back of its neck and placed it inside her stole.

She sighed and Shoui was left all alone in his confusion.

“What is all this?” he asked via the Dog God on his shoulder.

She turned around in surprise when she heard his voice.

“It’s a type of the Dog God said to possess and control people. …Have you heard of them? They’re a type of monster created by a disturbance in the Lives.”

“This thing is?”

When Shoui looked to the Dog God on his shoulder, it looked him in the eye and tilted its head.

The girl looked to him and the animal.

“Sorry. I seem to have worried you.”

“Well, I saw you looking scared, so I thought something had happened.”

"…Did I look scared?"

"Yeah. So did those three who ran away."

"Those three." She hung her head. "Then they all survived?"

"Survived? So something did happen?"

"Taromaru… That's this Dog God's name, but he did that to them."

"…Eh?"

The girl looked away from Shoui and the Dog God on his shoulder as she answered.

"I was lost and I tried to ask them for directions, but…well…"

The Dog God on her shoulder scratched at its head with its short front paw.

"They hit on her," it quickly said.

She blushed and glared at the Dog God which spoke on her behalf.

"You didn't have to say that!"

Shoui was shocked by this exchange that sounded like a one-man comedy routine, but then she seemed to recall the situation. The Dog God spoke in her voice.

"Ah." Both of them bowed down. "Sorry. I forgot I was speaking to you."

"No, no. Go right ahead."

“Um, anyway, I didn’t like it and a lot happened…” She took a breath. “Taromaru can sense my will and turn into a beast. He’s usually so small, but he turns into a large beast.”

“Then…the bite marks on those guys were-…”

“S-sorry for surprising you…but, u-um, please forgive me! I was scared too!”

Shoui decided to trust the girl who was honestly letting the creature speak her feelings.

He understood that the Dog God on her shoulder would directly read her thoughts without hiding anything.

“Of course, being deceived by a girl this cute might not be so bad. …Ah, wait! I take it back!”

“Eh? What do you mean you take it back?”

Shoui chose his words carefully and had the Dog God speak them.

“Um, how should I put it? You don’t have to worry about whether I forgive you or not. If they were skipping school at this time of day, you know they’re up to no good.”

He crossed his arms and gave a serious nod.

“Ah.”

But then he looked back to her.

She was once again pressing up against the wall to move away from him.

“Yeah, I guess you would do that. But I have a reason to be skipping school! I’m not like those guys! …I can’t believe this!”

“You don’t need to make any excuses. I trust you. I have to when Taromaru seems to like you so much.”

“Thanks. But, um, you really don’t have to worry about it. Those guys will be ashamed of running away, so they won’t accuse you of anything.”

“Really?”

“You being afraid is another issue entirely, though.”

“That’s true,” she agreed.

Shoui sighed and looked to the creature on his shoulder.

“Well, I got to see something neat, so I’m personally fine with all this. …More importantly, Miss Pet Owner.”

“Don’t call me that. That isn’t my Urban Nam. I’m Takada Seigi, the Fast Reader.”

“Then Takada-san, um, I’d like to give back this guy on my shoulder.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. A Dog God has seventy-two copies. Plus, Taromaru went to you because he’s taken a liking to you.”

“Th-that really isn’t the issue. I’d like head home…”

“Then take Taromaru with you. He went to you of his own free will, so there’s nothing I can do.”

“I can’t believe this… Are you sure this isn’t any trouble for you?”

“Then how about we make a deal?”

“What might that be?”

“I want you to give me directions.”

“What?”

Seigi smiled at his confusion.

She hid her mouth with the right hand she wore a ring on and nonchalantly continued.

“I’m not used to Osaka, you see.”

Shoui did not have a single reason to refuse.

Chapter 9: Presentation of Mysteries (Rhythm Rule Explanation)

Part 1

1:03 PM

A bullet train traveling west from Nagoya would arrive in Osaka after two hours.

Taeko and Saki had left Nagoya at noon, so they were currently halfway between Osaka and Nagoya in both time and distance.

Taeko took up an entire double seat on the right side of the aisle with the Dragon Emperor's fist resting on one of the seats. Saki sat in one of the opposite seats while writing something in the memo book he had taken from his attaché case.

Taeko faced the train's window.

The scenery below the winter sky was the concrete wall of the elevated track.

They were passing through the mountains of Oumi and about to enter the Koto region, so Lake Biwa was located past the wall.

However, Taeko was not looking at that scenery.

She was looking at the reflection of herself and Saki who sat across from her.

"What are ya doin'?"

“Going over everything that’s happened. I need to have some predictions before we get back to Osaka.”

“Predictions?”

“About what the Tokyoites are thinking.”

“Aren’t they tryin’ to destroy Ixolde? If it’s completed and creates the strongest Rhythm, the east-west power balance will shift westward pretty quick.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t plan to use the Flame High even if we do make it.”

“…What are ya talkin’ about? No one actually believes yer presentin’ it to the Mountain.”

“Don’t be stupid. Whether you want to call it the strongest Rhythm, Yamata, or the Flame High, it isn’t like a normal Rhythm.”

“…What do ya mean?”

“The Mountain and the Emergency Teachers are hiding the truth of the Kinki Riot from us, so there are some records we can’t view even as part of the Officers. But our upperclassmen managed to piece together the half-erased technical documents and historical records to figure out what Techs Tokyo’s Chancellor used during the Kinki Riot.”

“And the Ixolde Word Accelerator is goin’ to create that?”

Saki cut her off.

“Just listen. The Flame High used to be called a Heavy Rhythm, but that’s because they didn’t understand how it worked. After some tests, we’ve figured out the theory behind it.” He took a breath. “It creates music with a Tempo overwhelmingly faster than any currently existing Rhythm.”

“How much faster?”

“To use your Thunder High as a comparison, it would complete eighty sequences in the time yours took to complete just one. That’s twenty-eight times faster than the Break High which is the current fastest. It’s so fast you can’t think up your Words fast enough. And…”

“And?”

“Its flames spread.”

Taeko moved for the first time when she heard that.

She faced Saki who closed his memo book and faced her.

“I guess I can tell you why we have no intention of using the Flame High after creating it.”

“Oh?”

“The biggest problem is that we couldn’t determine what Rhythm the Osaka Chancellor had used at the time.”

“There aren’t any records of that?”

“They’re vague. It says he ‘used a Rhythm without using a Rhythm’. Can you decode that?”

Taeko thought for a second.

“That can wait. It’s an even bigger mystery than the Flame High’s mechanism.”

“Right? Anyway, having a trump card against Tokyo was of political importance, so some years back, Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers used the remaining records to build Ixolde.” He sighed. “But two years ago, there was an accident during a preliminary experiment.”

“…The ogre?”

“Yes. A mistake in the word acceleration caused one of the machines on the double helix pathway to burst into flames and produce an ogre. Simply put, that ogre was a failed creation of the Flame High.”

Saki put the memo book in his pocket and lightly struck his left palm with his right fist.

“From that, we learned about two of the Flame High’s powers. One, it can perfectly pierce any object. Its ultra-high speed Tempo creates a vibration that can ‘eat’ both the Lives composing an object and even the Rhythm techniques we create.”

“And the other one?”

“The spreading flames I mentioned before. …Anything the ogre set on fire would utterly burn away. The great speed of the Flame High intoxicates and steals the Lives making up the object.”

“…”

“Do you know why Souichirou took on mechanical arms and legs?’

“Ya don’t mean…?”

“I do.” Saki smiled a little. “His right arm caught on fire during the first battle, so he immediately chopped it off. And…he adopted prosthetic arms and legs for the next battle. That way he could purge them and attach a new one if any of them caught on fire.”

“So it’s a Rhythm that pierces the opponent’s body and burns them away? …That really is different from our Over Rhythms.”

“Do we really need a Rhythm that brings certain death to our opponents? Either way, it isn’t something anyone wants to master.”

“I see…”

“The Flame High is too dangerous. We know that all too well. The only reason we’re making it is…”

“Politics, right?”

“Giving up on what the previous years worked so hard on would be an embarrassment. This has gotten to be a lot of trouble.” Saki sank back into his seat. “Osaka’s 1st Special Duty Officer was said to be the third major base of the Kinki Riot because he held all the information on it, but I can’t understand any of it.”

“Will the other two bases not tell ya anythin’?”

“You’re talking about the Nandaimon Shrine and the Mountain. They’re both too secretive. They’re clearly trying to hold us in check, so we decided to present the Flame High to the Mountain right away.”

“I see… Well, that’s probably proof that the Mountain and Nandaimon both know the power of the Flame High.”

“It’d be a problem if the students caused another major conflict now that Japan has been split between east and west.”

He sighed.

“It’d be a problem for both of us,” said Taeko.

“Yes. …I get the feeling you’d never hear the end of it from Nagoya’s Student Council.”

“The students in my year wouldn’t have it too bad. It’s the younger years I’m worried about. …If somethin’ like that happened, they could even end up joinin’ Tokyo’s side.”

“I’m surprised you’re willing to come back to Osaka with all that local trouble going on.”

“I’m indebted to someone there.” Taeko touched the Dragon Emperor with her right hand while still looking out the window. “But if that happens, it’ll be just like my brother wanted.”

“Oh, the brother killed by the Killing Holder…”

“He went to the Mountain for Chancellor’s trainin’ that year, but Yuuki Yuuki was given the Koto Chancellor position on the recommendation of the previous Chancellor who was expected to keep the spot. My brother ended up as Vice Chancellor.”

“So he had the skill, but he couldn’t outdo her?”

“The Yamashita family has produced Chancellors for generations. …Due to the eyes of our family on his back and the Ixolde issue, he wanted to turn Nagoya’s focus toward Tokyo by defeatin’ the Koto Chancellor.”

“But Yamashita Gihei lost…and the age remained unchanged.”

“I couldn’t accept the remains of a loser, so his right arm was apparently buried somewhere at Nandaimon.”

She laughed quietly and Saki said nothing.

“Let’s get back on topic,” she said with a slight shrug. “In yer opinion, who in Kansai could defeat an opponent wieldin’ the Flame High?”

“Either Souichirou who has fought a close approximation before…or Yuuki Yuuki the Killing Holder.”

“I see…”

“But what is Tokyo thinking? If they’re worried about the Flame High, why didn’t they destroy Ixolde when they attacked the night before last?”

Saki crossed his arms.

He looked Taeko in the eye through his sunglasses but seemed to be speaking to himself.

“And there’s more. Why did they crush Nagoya?”

“Because we got in their way, right?”

“They didn’t crush Gifu or the Koto region on their way to Osaka. They had to have gone through those areas too, so why did they only crush Nagoya?”

“…”

“There’s only one answer.”

“What’s that?”

“They have to be waiting for Ixolde to be activated. That way they can steal the Flame High.”

And…

“They might be planning to attack Nagoya.”

“Ya mean they’ll take over Nagoya as a midway point and continue west from there?”

“Yes. If they can rule Nagoya with the Flame High in hand, it’ll give them some decent publicity in both the east and the west.”

“But that would require havin’ someone who can control the Flame High, right?”

Saki smiled at Taeko’s question.

“Nakamura Hisahide said he was going to Osaka in search of a bond with his sister.”

“What about it?”

“Who was the Tokyo’s female Chancellor that used the Flame High during the Kinki Riot?”

“Nakamura Midori…”

Tension filled Taeko’s voice when she spoke that name.

Saki smiled and nodded at her obvious concern.

“There’s no doubting it.” He took a breath. “Nakamura Hisahide is Nakamura Midori’s brother.”

Part 2

1:36 PM

Students were visible here and there as Shoui carried a Dog God on his shoulder and walked around Osaka with the girl named Takada Seigi.

They were looking for the hotel at which she had a reservation.

She tilted her head as they walked along the road in front of Nanba Station.

“Was it the Osaka Hotel?”

There were hotels with names like that everywhere.

That name was especially little help in the category of hotels cheap enough for a normal student to stay at them.

“This is quite the problem… I can see why you were searching around since morning.”

Shoui scratched at his head and looked around. The semi-cylindrical Nanba Station was right in front of them and a few phones were located in front of the station’s entrance.

"How about you call home to ask?"

"Oh, I can't do that. I left on this trip without telling anyone."

"What?"

"It's sort of a graduation trip and I'm skipping school."

"Skipping school, are you? …Kids these days sure like to have fun."

"You understand, don't you? If you were to run away from home…"

…Well, I kind of get it.

He tried to say that with a bitter smile, but…

"I don't have any parents, so I don't understand," answered the Dog God on his shoulder.

Takada's expression changed before he could scold the Dog God.

Her cheerful look clouded over.

"Ah, don't worry about it!"

But it was too late.

The cloudy expression soon produced rain. Tears welled up in Takada's eyes.

Shoui looked around quickly to check the afternoon crowd in front of the station.

…I can't believe this. I hope no one's watching… / "I can't believe this. I hope no one's watching…"

He panicked when the Dog God spoke his thoughts aloud.

“Wait! I don’t mean that in a bad away! Um…!”

Takada nodded and quickly lowered her head.

“Sorry about that. My emotions burst out without warning again. That was a nuisance, wasn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t call it a nuisance. Honestly, it just surprised me. …What was that about?”

“People’s thoughts reach me through Taromaru.”

The Dog God licked at the tears on her cheek.

“So I read your memories…”

“Oh, so you saw when I was buried alive and nearly died during the Kinki Riot…”

He smiled bitterly as the girl wiped away the tears with her ring-bearing hand.

“I can’t believe this. So this Dog God is connected to you?”

“Taromaru…no, the entire Dog God race speaks people’s thoughts.”

“I see.”

“But they can’t speak thoughts people can’t put into words. Instead, they try to understand those thoughts and share them with each other.”

“So the memories and images I briefly thought of were sent back to you through the Dog God?”

Takada nodded.

“As they grow more and more accustomed to reading someone’s thoughts, that person’s thoughts and memories…are directly transmitted to me.”

“I can’t read your thoughts, though.”

“You probably need to get used to reading them.”

“That’s not fair…”

Shoui then realized something and the Dog God on his shoulder reflexively put it to words.

“You can see my lewd thoughts too?”

“Yes, I can.”

Shoui’s face stiffened at her Dog God’s simple answer.

She smiled bitterly while wiping away the tears and then leaned against the station’s outer wall.

“You were sneaking peeks at my butt and legs from behind before.”

“W-well! They’re pretty great! Wait, what am I saying!? Calm down! Agh!”

“…Taromaru is reading all of your thoughts.”

“Wait, wait, wait! That’s, um, the thing about that is…”

“You like legs in stockings?”

“Indeed I do. …Wait, no!”

“Don’t worry. I understand.”

“That stockings are amazing?”

“No.”

“Th-then, it’s something worse? I do have a feeling I was thinking some pretty awful things…”

“I said don’t worry. There are people out there thinking even more unbelievable things.”

“That doesn’t make me feel much better!”

Takada giggled as Shoui shouted through the Dog God.

She was laughing even though she had been crying just a moment before.

When he noticed that change, Shoui sighed and let his shoulders droop.

“You’re an interesting person…”

“Am I?”

“Yes. This girl I know almost never lets her emotions show.”

“Really? I’m jealous…”

“You are?”

“People used to say I never hide anything I’m feeling or that I’m emotionally unstable.”

“Used to, hm?”

“Oh, right. My memories don’t get through to you.”

Shoui looked to the Dog God named Taromaru on his shoulder. The animal looked him in the eye and tilted his head.

“How smart is this guy?”

“I’m not sure. My cousin said his intelligence matches whoever he’s possessing.”

“Your cousin?”

“Yes, he was the one who created Taromaru. He’s a Word Master, you see. Taromaru was based on one that was possessing that cousin, but it left him because he found someone to support him.”

“They stop possessing you once you’re no longer no single?”

Takada shook her head.

“They possess someone who is indecisive.”

“…Indecisive?”

Shoui placed a hand on his chin in thought and Taromaru spoke his thoughts aloud.

“It’s probably not over whether stockings or panty hose are better. That’s getting into the perverted area again, which could cause some problems for me. So what could she be indecisive about? It’s probably something more pleasant. Something pleasurable…no, that’s getting back into pervert territory again.”

“Shoui-san, Shoui-san. I can hear everything you’re thinking.”

“Eh? Oh, really?”

“It sounded like a bunch of nonsense.”

“I can’t believe this…”

He looked to the Taromaru on his shoulder, but the creature only scratched at the back of his head with his back paw.

“I need to get back to normal as soon as possible. That way this guy won’t have to speak for me anymore.”

“Really? He saved me. I’ve always been able to read a little bit of other people’s Lives. That’s why they influence me so much.”

She smiled a little.

“I couldn’t even go outside during elementary school, but then my cousin came and made Taromaru from my Live without speaking a word.”

“Then, he’s…”

“Yes. He’s apparently a Dog God highly tuned to my thoughts. I said I could read the thoughts of the people he possesses because it was a trait of Dog Gods, but that might be unique to Taromaru.”

“I see.”

“Dog Gods apparently choose someone to possess if not given any specific orders, but to be honest, you’re the first one he’s chosen on his own other than me.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If what my cousin said is true, then you must be indecisive about something.”

“I’m not sure what to tell you…”

“But it’s true,” said Takada. “Taromaru reads people’s thoughts and eats them as Lives, so he possesses people who are indecisive and conflicted…”

“And speaks for them like this?”

Takada spoke as Shoui scratched at his head.

“I think it means you have a dual nature.”

“What? Is that like being both an S and an M? …Wait, no!”

“I like how you’ve been playing both the boke and tsukkomi.”

“Well, I guess playing both roles myself would be another sort of dual nature.” He sighed. “Anyway, I guess this means I’m worrying over something even more than I thought.”

“Yes, that kind of dual nature. But it isn’t a bad thing.”

“Really?”

“Most people have something like that, even if it isn’t on the same level as you. Including those indecent thoughts. …Some people’s public side is stronger and some people’s private side is stronger.”

“…”

“The way I see it, the more indecisive someone is, the stronger their ultimate answer will be.”

"…Their answer, huh?"

Takada nodded.

"You have more on your mind than those indecent things, don't you?"

"Personally, those are the things I've been trying to think about the most, though. …Why does this bastard have to say all those things aloud!?"

"I don't mind."

"Eh? Really? You don't mind that the guy standing next to you was imagining you naked? …Stop it, you idiot!"

Shoui reached for the Taromaru on his shoulder, but the creature hid behind his back.

He chased after the creature as if scratching at his body, but he could not catch the thing.

Takada gave an honest laugh as she watched.

"Don't worry, Shoui-san. I know you're only thinking those things on the surface."

"…R-really?"

"Yes, I can see the girl in glasses you're thinking about deep down."

"Oh, wow. So I'm talking to a girl while thinking about another girl? Am I a wishy-washy A-type with a lucky color of red, or something?"

“You’re troubled by this self-analysis, aren’t you?” said Takada while peering into his face. “My family is naturally skilled with Lives, so how about I read your destiny a little?”

“…You can do that? That sounds like a Tuner.”

“I am a Tuner, actually. It’s just that I abandoned that path due to the instability I mentioned before.”

“…”

“I called myself a Fast Reader when I introduced myself, didn’t I? I borrow Taromaru’s power to read the Lives of people’s or the world’s destiny.”

“Hmm… I’m not so sure about this. It sounds more legit than a fortune-telling.”

“Please close your eyes. That will help calm your mind.”

She did not give him a choice and he closed his eyes on reflex.

She immediately held his cheeks between her hands.

“!?”

He opened his eyes and found her face right in front of him.

She had kissed him.

After two breaths, she pulled her lips away and returned to her previous position.

He stared at her face.

“Oh, dear. I just had my lips stolen…”

“Why the effeminate tone of voice?”

“Well, it was so sudden…”

“Is it that surprising? You went all the way with that glasses girl.”

“…You have no problem saying some pretty outrageous things, you know that?”

“Anyway, that wasn’t what this was about. I was reading your *kotodama*. In other words, your Live.”

“…That seems like a bit of a sad explanation to me.”

“If you hadn’t been so surprised, I could have read a little deeper.”

She closed her eyes and the Taromaru on her shoulder looked up toward heaven.

The creature sang with her voice.

A white flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in the fire

A memory of death floats in nothingness

A king saves him

A queen laments him

A sage resigns himself

Fall into indecisiveness while looking to another’s path

Choose your own path and hesitate

The true path lies in the past

After the clear voice came to an end, Taromaru sighed.

Speaking so much seemed to have been tough on his small body.

Takada opened her eyes and Shoui asked a question.

“Was that…my Words?”

“No, it wasn’t. Not in your case.”

“Then what was it?”

“Good question. …Your destiny can always be changed, but that song was your future based on your current Live. It’s a little vague since I didn’t get a perfect read on you, though.”

She smiled and Shoui sighed. The Dog God spoke his calmed thoughts.

“I’m not gonna be able to fondle this girl’s breasts… Wait, no!”

Part 3

1:48 PM

As the morning sun slowly began to drop from its midday height, a single guest arrived at the Nandaimon Shrine.

It was the monk who had been referred to as Iba back at Nara Station.

He stood at the center of the shrine’s grounds. Without speaking a word, he stared straight forward.

Senga stood before him with a bamboo broom in hand.

She spoke with Iba's gaze on her.

"Instead of standing there, how about you say something?"

"…I see you haven't changed in the last thirteen years."

"That's because I'm so young."

"I believe you turned sixty-seven this year."

"The man with the greatest grudge against me was indeed the type to say such hopeless things with a straight face."

—Senga – Mind Tech – Take – Sense Killer Intent – Hit.

"Iba, you're the same as back then. You can be silently and expressionlessly staring at someone but still overflowing with killer intent."

"That is my way of doing things."

Senga smiled bitterly.

"More importantly, Iba, what do you want? I would like to finish cleaning before the sun sets."

"Then I shall get straight to the point." Iba furrowed his brow as he was wont to do. "I would like to declare war."

"Oh?"

"This is a declaration from Tokyo to Osaka, and from those who died in the Kinki Riot to you."

“Oh? And why would you be doing this?”

“To clear away all of the mistakes that led to the Kinki Riot.”

“For how expressionless you are, you must really see me as an enemy.”

“I no longer have any comrades.”

“Did you learn nothing from the Kinki Riot, Iba?”

“I have a question concerning that.”

“?”

Senga gave an exaggerated tilt of the head and Iba gave a straightforward question.

“What was the Kinki Riot from the perspective of the teachers?”

“Based on that killer intent, I’m guessing you already know more or less. …That explains why you hid in the Mountain and never appeared before me in the thirteen years since that battle came to an end.”

“I would like to hear the truth in your words.”

“For example?”

“Most of those at the center of that war were taught by you.”

“Yes, that’s true. Once Yuuki could walk, I made a trip around Japan and visited the local Mountains.”

“Was it a coincidence?”

“Was what?”

Iba maintained his straightforward gaze and clarified his question in an emotionless voice.

“That you taught students to use Heavy Rhythms everywhere you went.”

“What do you think, Iba?”

“…”

“Tell me.”

“Very well.” Iba nodded before opening his mouth. “That battle was meant to reveal all of the Heavy Rhythms the Mountain had sanctified and to create a public fear of those Rhythms.”

“And?”

“This is only my personal view, but did you set it all up in order to eliminate those Heavy Rhythms that you viewed as such a danger to the world?”

“I see.”

“It is a fact that the students you taught to use the Heavy Rhythms fought each other, even when they were friends or family.”

“If I had not taught them to use the Heavy Rhythms, that conflict would not have dragged on so long…”

“And the Heavy Rhythms would not have been eliminated.”

“…So you’re focusing on the result, are you?”

“The Kinki Riot added most of Japan’s Rhythms to the list of Death Techno.”

“Although most of them were only sealed by the Mountain or by me.” Senga smiled bitterly. “You plan to bring back the Heavy Rhythms, don’t you? A moron showed up here before…and named you as his teacher.”

“…His teacher?”

“Yes. He sounded proud of it. It was a kid with spiky hair.”

“He sounded…proud?”

“Yes.”

“…Ha.”

“?”

“Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Iba laughed. He opened his mouth, shook his shoulders, and erased his usual self in laughter.

A moment later…

“Interesting!”

By the time he shouted that word, his usual lack of expression had returned. He stared straight toward Senga.

“I am honestly surprised he would call me his teacher.”

“Does it delight you that much for Nakamura Midori’s brother to call you his teacher?”

“Oh? I see you did your homework.”

“He was interested in the Flame High and in his sister, his family name was Nakamura, and he called you his teacher. Who else could it be? …So you want to clear away your regrets from thirteen years ago?”

“Is that so strange?”

“I respect you for it.”

“And I you. …I came to realize that over the past thirteen years.”

“Did you?”

“Out of concern for this country, you gave everyone power and then killed them in an attempt to eliminate the king.”

“You sound confident in that theory.”

“I did not spend thirteen years at the Mountain for nothing.”

“Is that so? Then are you building on my plan to kill everyone but one in an attempt to create a king?”

Iba did not nod.

Senga rotated her broom with her wrist and aimed the bottom at him like a spear.

“Iba, is this conversation a declaration of war from former student to former teacher? History will repeat itself. This could lead to many deaths once more.”

“Do not worry. We have a prophet with us, so we can avoid all danger.”

“You’re hopeless.”

“Then shall we spar as we used to? I never could get a single strike past your spear at that Mountain training ground…but things have changed.”

“Have you dabbled in White Noise and the Shinkage Style?”

That brought a change to Iba’s expression: he frowned.

But Senga continued regardless.

“I prefer my method over all else. If you are intent on destroying the situation I have created here, then I will take the appropriate countermeasures.”

“Can I take that as an acceptance of my declaration of war? Yet the only card in your deck is your granddaughter.”

“Your trump card is Ixolde’s activation tonight, isn’t it? The only way you can conquer this country is to borrow Osaka’s power. Befitting of the former Osaka 1st Special Duty Officer who let Kuki and Midori die…”

—Senga – Intimidation Tech – Take – Intimidation – Hit!

"…to become the sole survivor of the Kinki Riot!"

"!!"

Iba released a voiceless shout and took a defensive stance.

At the same moment, the cellphone in Senga's pocket rang far too quietly for the scene.

"…?"

Their eyes met.

Iba released killer intent and Senga spoke with the broom in hand.

"When you hear why this emergency phone is ringing, you'll have better things to do than fight me."

"Nonsense."

"Can you still say that after I tell you only the Emergency Teachers or the Mountain leaders can call this phone?"

—Senga – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

"See? You're curious. …And there goes your bad habit of growing even more expressionless when I say that. Listen. There's only one reason the Emergency Teachers or the Mountain would be in a hurry to contact me now."

She went on to tell him what that reason was.

The persistently ringing phone seemed to show just how badly whichever group it was wanted to contact her.

The words Senga spoke over that background noise elicited movement from Iba.

He began to run.

That signaled the end of this confrontation between teacher and student and signaled the beginning of a new battle.

Chapter 10: Composition of Battle (List of Characters Special Moves)

Part 1

2:29 PM

A shopping district known as Europe Town existed near the Shinsaibashi district of Osaka.

Several dozen shops were densely packed in between two short roads. It was primarily made up of boutiques and cafes, so it acted as a contrast to the northern business district. The stores were filled with people and bright colors.

Two people stood on the second floor of a certain brick building there.

One was a boy in a suit and the other was a girl in rough personal clothes.

They were Ikemaru Takahiro and Aoi Hijiri.

The two of them were inside a lingerie shop.

Colorful underwear was displayed half-disorderly and half-orderly under the white lights of the store that was larger than it looked from the outside.

Since it was only early afternoon, the store was relatively empty and most of the customers were women, but there was also an older couple.

When she saw that couple, Aoi gently elbowed Ikemaru in the side.

“That middle-aged couple has got to be cheating.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They’re using separate wallets. …So what do you think about this color?”

“I think it would look great on you.”

“Then what about this color?”

“I think it would look great on you.”

“Then what about this risqué one?”

“It would not suit you in the slightest.”

“You have some pretty solid preferences, Takahiro.”

“I prefer to keep some of it left to the imagination.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure I can live up to your imagination…”

Aoi looked to Takahiro’s suit.

A manila envelope was poking out from below the scarf she had made.

“Will that idiot Hisahide really be okay with those documents…and those Discord Bombs you bought?”

“We are in trouble if he isn’t. Hacking into the government office only revealed the one sewage line running by near Ixolde and we only have the three Discord Bombs.”

“So we have to know where to set the Discord Bombs? We’re really relying on others a lot on this expedition.”

“I would prefer to obtain a lot more information. Preparing the charms is not easy either.”

“You put a lot of effort into this. That’s an information broker for you.”

“I prefer to be called a businessman.”

Aoi smiled bitterly.

“It’s true you might not be an information broker after all. You haven’t been able to figure out where Seigi is.”

“It hasn’t been easy.”

“Hisahide’s upset. After all, Seigi was the first person to agree that he would become the king.”

Aoi lightly tapped the underwear-wearing mannequin standing next to her.

With a small sound, the plastic body shook a little.

“The king, hm?”

“Personally, my top priority is your issue, not making him the king.”

“We’re having trouble finding that too, aren’t we?”

“Not even the Live laboratory I hacked into said anything about cherry blossoms blooming in the winter.”

Takahiro looked to his own right hand.

He wore a black leather glove and the gaze behind his glasses was cold.

But…

“Don’t worry about it. Even the power of your kotodama can’t create data that wasn’t in the databank to begin with.”

“Even without the data, I could still alter the Lives of the cherry blossoms like when I created the Dog God.”

“Altering the Lives of organic objects takes a lot out of you, right? Seigi told me.”

“…”

“Besides, I doubt the cherry blossoms my mom and that man saw blooming in the winter had anything to do with Lives. Maybe you could call it an unusual phenomenon that occurs under the right conditions. That’s what I think it was.”

“In that case, we won’t find anything written about it at the sightseeing spots.”

“Iba isn’t going to tell us, so we need to be patient. Maybe look through some of Osaka’s historical records. …And if we can help Hisahide rejoin the east and west, finding the cherry blossoms will be a lot easier.”

“You sure are positive.”

“Being negative is pretty attractive too. Like Seigi used to be. I was jealous that she could tremble like that. Don’t you agree, Takahiro?”

“Being able to tremble in your indecisiveness is the ultimate luxury.”

“I used to be like that. Until that man died and I learned the true reason the Shinkage Style was created.”

She sighed and fell silent.

Meanwhile, Ikemaru removed his right glove.

“…”

As soon as he lightly shook his white hand, a single copper coin appeared between his index and middle finger.

He placed the dull brown coin in his palm and showed it to Aoi.

“Flower.”

As soon as he spoke that quiet word, the coin split open with a sound much like breaking ice.

It did not just break in half. The surface peeled away like a skin, split apart, and extended outwards and upwards. It almost looked like a blossoming flower bud.

The small coin produced thin flower petals.

After a mere five seconds, a red copper flower had formed in his palm.

It resembled a cherry blossom and Aoi commented on it.

“A Tune Bust transformation… That was your Word Master power, wasn’t it?”

“I can read all Lives and freely change the Live structure of anything I speak to while touching it with my skin. …It is a useful power.”

“Didn’t you used to call it an unpleasant power?”

“Not to worry. I now have someone who can reject my power.”

“Then is this flower for the one person in the world you know will be fine touching it with her bare hands?”

“Yes.”

Aoi smiled, narrowed her eyes, and tilted her head.

“Are you trying to cheer me up because I fell silent like that?”

“Do you not want this flower?”

“It only cost ten yen, didn’t it?”

“Only I can make one.”

“Then I’ll take it.”

When she accepted, Ikemaru placed the metal flower in the breast pocket of her blouson. And…

“Sorry, Takahiro. I have been kind of gloomy lately.”

“Didn’t you just say being negative is attractive?”

“I got that line from my mom.”

“But it’s true.”

“Then…why did you save Seigi? You were the one that saved her from her negativity even though creating that Dog God put you in the hospital for three days.”

“I will answer that…when the time is right.”

It was a vague response, but Aoi thought about it and nodded.

She then looked away from him.

“Oh?” she said after looking out the window.

“What is it?” he asked.

“This is convenient. There’s the person we were thinking about speaking with at the hotel.”

The two of them looked down to the road where a tall girl walked along the sidewalk.

Her ponytail and giant false left arm made her quite recognizable.

It was Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.

“She must be on the way to Prefectural #2. Probably to wait for Ixolde’s activation.”

“If we’re going to stop her, now would be the time,” agreed Aoi. “If what our master said is true, then Nagoya won’t side with us unless we get her on our side.”

“Then let’s stop her before she meets up with the Kansai group. It will probably mean a fight, but first…”

“But first?”

Ikemaru gave Aoi a serious look.

“You need to buy a bra and put it on. You will probably have difficulty fighting without the proper support.”

Aoi forcefully elbowed him in the side.

Part 2

2:34 PM

Taeko walked through the streets of Osaka.

Walking from the hotel in front of Osaka Station to Prefectural #2 on the southern edge of the Chuo Ward took about half an hour, but it took closer to two hours when leisurely window shopping along the way.

She was taking some detours and looking around the southern streets near Nanba Station.

“Ixolde’s activation isn’t until seven anyway.”

The watch on her right arm said it was only 2:35. Not even ten minutes had passed since she had parted ways with Saki at Osaka Station.

She had spent the time looking around a few boutiques and a sporting goods store that doubled as a weapons store.

Osaka was home to more corporations than Nagoya and it had plenty of nice weapons.

The cold war that had triggered the split between east and west had created plenty of suspicion which in turn had led to the development of weapons and a system to provide them cheaply to students. As the number of purchasers had grown, the level of weaponry and prosthetics had also grown and the mass production abilities of multinational corporations supported the dissemination of those advancements.

But while some weapons and prosthetics had continued to advance and were now treated just like sporting goods, there were some cruder old-fashioned designs that still focused on destructive power.

The Eighth Dragon Emperor that took the place of Taeko's left arm was one of those.

It was a special false arm created at the Mountain that had a global registration license plate attached.

"…"

She touched the Dragon Emperor and faced forward.

She saw the show window of a boutique much like the others in this southern area.

Beyond the large pane of glass, four mannequins were wearing the same suit in different colors.

"…"

She silently touched the Dragon Emperor with her right hand.

—Taeko – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Visually Detect – Hit.

She looked into the store beyond the mannequins.

She saw some girls in white and green sailor uniforms.

They seemed to be third years who had already finished their closing ceremony. A group of five held a somewhat mature aura around them as they calmly and patiently perused the lipstick section.

When Taeko noticed herself watching them, she looked away.

When she turned her eyes from the boutique, she turned to the left.

She then started walking.

Following the road from this shopping district would take her to Prefectural #2 in about ten minutes.

She walked a few steps.

—Taeko – Sight Tech – Auto-Take – Spot – Hit.

"Huh? …Shoui! What are ya doin'!?"

Her voice immediately reached the boy as he walked down the road, so he stopped and turned back.

There was a girl next to him.

—Taeko – Person Tech – Take – Identify Person – Hit.

Taeko did not recognize the girl.

"…?"

She tilted her head and stopped in front of Shoui.

"What are ya doin' in a place like this?"

“Hm? Well, just a little bit of socialization.”

Taeko noticed something odd about his answer.

His mouth was not moving, yet she heard his voice.

She frowned and peered at his face.

“…? Shoui?”

“Wh-why are you staring at me like that?”

“When did you learn ventrilo-…?”

Before she could say “quism”, a mouse-like creature poked its head out from his collar.

The animal opened its mouth and spoke in his voice.

“Oh, sorry. …I guess I didn’t mention it, but I’m stuck like this for a while.”

“…Eh?”

“You can tell this guy’s talking for me, right?”

“Wait a second.”

Taeko reached her right hand out toward the creature.

When it saw her approaching hand, it gave a cry of warning that sounded like tearing silk.

It bared surprisingly sharp fangs as it did so.

“…”

She pulled her hand back and the girl next to Shoui spoke without moving her lips either.

“You can’t do that. He doesn’t like people who aren’t indecisive.”

“Indecisive? What’s this creature and who’s this girl, Shoui?”

Taeko looked to the girl who wore a stole.

The innocent-looking girl had an identical creature on her shoulder.

Shoui scratched his head and the creature at his collar spoke.

“I can’t believe this. How am I supposed to explain it?”

“I don’t understand any of this, Shoui.”

“I’m still not used to it myself, to be honest. Anyway, my throat was crushed.”

“Yer throat?”

“Yes. See these bandages? I took a kick to the neck.”

“Oh, I thought ya’d slit yer throat or somethin’, but I guess not.”

“You say some scary things sometimes.”

Shoui smiled bitterly and used his thumb to point at the creature poking its head out from his collar.

“She’s letting me borrow this guy. He’s a Dog God and he reads and speaks people’s thoughts.”

“…That’s pretty weird.”

“Agreed. …But anyway, I’m showing her around the city as a way of repaying her.”

“I see,” said Taeko with a slight nod.

She had avoided the main question at hand, so she ignored the creatures sitting on the two of them and looked to the girl.

“Miss, don’t ya have school?” she asked.

“No. I came to this city on a trip.”

Taeko scratched her head at the answer.

She looked to Shoui and gave an exasperated sigh.

“Ya do know Shoui’s busy right now, don’t ya?”

“Yes, I read his kotodama.”

“His kotodama?”

“I read it mouth-to-mouth.”

When she heard that, Taeko punched Shoui with the Dragon Emperor’s fist.

He was knocked flat onto the brick sidewalk, but he quickly hopped back up.

“~! Wh-what was that for!?”

“Ah?”

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Emit Killer Intent – Hit.

“Ya spent so much time worryin’ over the Killin’ Holder and now ya’ve forgotten all about her and are kissin’ some other girl?”

“It wasn’t really a ki-…ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! P-please, not the gut!”

“Shut up, ya moron.”

“Wait! Um, Takada-san! Please say something!”

“Oh, right. Um… It was kind of embarrassing.”

“That isn’t helping!”

“I see. Then it’s time ya died, Shoui.”

Takada placed a hand on Taeko’s arm that was grabbing Shoui’s collar.

“Please wait.”

During a pause, Taeko looked down at Takada in silence.

Her gaze was sharp, but Takada received it without fear.

“What is it?” quietly asked Taeko.

“I know perfectly well that there is a girl who needs to be by Shoui-san’s side.”

“…”

“You know that too, right?”

Her confident tone settled everything.

Taeko finally let go of Shoui’s collar while also shoving him away.

“Ahh,” he sighed. “That was scary.”

“Ya really are a moron.”

“Wh-why?”

“If ya don’t restrain her properly, I’ll kill her!”

Taeko looked to Shoui and saw his expression change at the word “kill”.

It shifted from peaceful to tense.

His body did not move in the slightest, but an aura filled with power left it.

The Dog God put that aura to words.

“Don’t do that.”

“Then ya’d better hurry up and restrain her! The only reason I didn’t kill her was because ya were there for her. Ya haven’t forgotten that, have ya?”

“…”

He said nothing, but the creature at his collar did.

“I haven’t forgotten, but… Wait, don’t say that, you idiot!”

“I don’t mind. Ya haven’t forgotten, but what?”

“Please wait!”

The girl stood in front of Shoui and looked up at Taeko.

“Don’t use Taromaru to force people to speak their thoughts! It isn’t natural!”

“Isn’t havin’ everythin’ out in the open for the best?”

“No. No matter what you might say, Shoui-san’s indecision belongs to him. No matter what might happen, no one but him can make up his mind for him.”

The girl spoke in a strong, clear tone, so Taeko looked down at her.

But the girl once more accepted her gaze and did not fall back.

She wrinkled her brow and a look of seriousness rather than anger filled her innocent face.

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Hit.

Taeko closed her eyes and sighed toward the ground.

“It’s no use.”

“What is?”

“No matter how much ya worry over it, this guy will never leave that girl’s side.”

“That’s why I want to see what he does,” said the girl.

The seriousness on her face was replaced by a slight smile.

Her expressions seemed to change a lot and Taeko also smiled.

“All the girls by his side are too clever for their own good.”

“So are you, aren’t you?”

Taeko turned to Shoui.

“Am I by yer side?”

“You’re definitely close enough to grab my collar.”

“That’s fine then.”

—Taeko – Box Tech – Take – Backhand Blow – Hit!

Unable to react to the sudden attack by the Dragon Emperor, Shoui flipped once and collapsed to the ground.

“Owww! Wh-what was that for!?”

“It’s yer punishment for messing with people’s emotions. Complain and ya’ll get another one.”

“You two seem to get along well.”

“How!?” / “How!?”

Their slight difference in intonation allowed their voices to harmonize perfectly.

Takada smiled a little and she giggled without using the Dog God.

Shoui and Taeko exchanged a glance when they saw it.

A moment later…

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

“Boss.”

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

"Yeah."

"Hm? What is it, you two?"

—Shoui – Hear Tech – Take – Measure Distance – Hit.

"I wish I could say it's nothing, but it isn't. Boss, know anyone who might have a grudge against you?"

—Taeko – Hear Tech – Take – Measure Distance – Hit.

"Well, when ya've lived for eighteen years, ya tend to make five hundred or so enemies."

"That's too many enemies."

—Taeko – Hear Tech – Take – Determine Number of Enemies – Hit.

"Don't be stupid. We need to get goin' as soon as I turn around. Prepare yerself."

—Taeko – Steel Tech – Take – Dragon Emperor 1st Activation – Hit.

—Shoui – Hear Tech – Take – Determine Number of Enemies – Hit.

"Oh, c'mon. You mean we aren't running away?"

"Fleein' in the face of the enemy is punishable by a fatal beatin'."

"Why is everyone around me so hot-blooded?"

"Um, you mean me too?"

"No, no. You're the nonconformist on this one, Takada-san."

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Presence – Hit.

“Here they come!” shouted Taeko as she turned around.

Shoui kept Takada behind him and turned a bit to the side.

They both saw the same thing.

“A burning bullet!?”

Two balls of fire the size of a human head flew straight toward them like meteors.

—Shoui – Break High/Boxing/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Knock Down – Hit!

—Taeko – Lightning High/Boxing/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Knock Down – Hit!

Two bursting sounds rang out in quick succession.

A moment later, screams finally erupted from the road, but it was so sudden that the people could only express their surprise. They did not have time to take cover or anything like that.

Taeko clicked her tongue, pulled a flare from her pocket, and fired it into the sky.

A blue ball of light rose into the sky in order to inform the local guard station of the danger.

At the same time…

“Boss!? Look at the ground!”

When she heard the confusion in Shoui’s voice, Taeko kept her attention on their surroundings while looking to the ground.

The identity of the burning bullet lay on the brick path after she had knocked it down.

It was a ten yen coin so hot it was smoking.

"…?"

Shoui's voice answered her puzzlement.

"I don't know how, but those weren't bullets that were emitting flames and flying through the air. They were coins."

"What does that mean?"

"Who knows. How about we ask the people who did this?"

—Taeko – Sight Tech – Take – Detect Enemy – Hit!

She readily found who she was looking for.

As the people hid inside the nearby stores and side roads, two people walked out onto the sidewalk in front of Taeko's group.

They were about a five second run away. One was a tall, slender boy in a suit and the other was a girl in a blouson and with a hexagonal rod in hand.

They looked to Taeko and Shoui without smiling but without any hostility either.

"I guess I can figure out who ya are by fightin' ya," said Taeko.

As soon as she stepped forward, someone cried out from behind her.

"Takahiro!?"

It was Takada.

The enemy gave an obvious reaction to her voice.

“Seigi!?” asked the girl.

The boy next to her frowned a bit as he looked beyond Taeko and Shoui.

The battle was beginning with a truly strange composition.

Part 3

2:45 PM

The battle began with both sides working to protect a single girl.

The siren known as the Fourth Alarm rang and two boy-girl pairs began moving at the center of the quickly emptying shopping district.

A single girl watched them.

Shoui was worried about her.

“I can’t believe this.”

He saw Takada holding Taromaru in her arms, but Taromaru’s size had changed.

Instead of mouse-sized, he was now the size of a puppy.

Sensing her fear, he had grown to confront the situation she was facing. Shoui now understood what had happened at that scene when he had first met her.

The fleeing students had been attacked by the grown Taromaru.

He had a feeling he understood her fear.

“Is she afraid that her own fear will hurt others?”

He saw her desperately petting Taromaru’s head to calm him.

But Taromaru kept his fangs bared and produced a low growling from deep in his throat.

The Dog God was no longer reading her thoughts.

The fear of this battle that resided deep in her heart was more powerful than her thoughts.

She was both trying to calm Taromaru and to calm her own emotions. Without speaking a word, she was trying to calm her own fear of hurting others.

“…”

Shoui recalled the past.

Yuuki had once said something to him when visiting his room.

“ ‘Protect me from myself’, hm?”

He muttered that while facing forward.

Taeko and the enemy were glaring at each other from a distance.

The enemy had named themselves and Taeko had responded in kind.

The enemies were Tokyo’s Vice Chancellor and Special Duty Officer.

The night before, Shoui had met and lost to a boy claiming to be Tokyo’s Chancellor.

That meant the main force of Tokyo's Chancellor's Officers was in Osaka.

Shoui did not know what was going on, but he could tell Takada knew them and that she was afraid of this battle.

"…"

He walked forward and the two from Tokyo reacted.

They had been entirely focused on Taeko, but now they began to focus on Shoui too.

—Taeko – Mind Tech – Take – Detect Presence – Hit.

As soon as Shoui arrived alongside Taeko, she took off running.

"!"

She ran forward.

She had won the initiative.

Her Dragon Emperor gave a roar.

With that roar to summon the Lightning High, lightning enveloped her metal arm.

The enemy moved back, but Taeko did not care.

She continued forward with the Dragon Emperor at the ready.

"Yer still in range!"

As a Steel Master, she was an all-rounder who could make long-distance attacks too.

The Dragon Emperor gave its thunderous roar and her attack range spread.

—Taeko – Shot Tech – Take – Prepare to Fire – Hit.

—Taeko – Lightning High/Steel/Shot Tech – Multi-Take – Electro Cannon – Hit!

"!"

She held forward the Dragon Emperor arm and the lightning wrapping around it was instantly fired forward.

The electric attack was wide enough to fill the road and flew toward her opponents more like a pillar than a net.

The wide-range attack of white light raced through the air, but…

"Leave it to me."

With a refreshing voice, Aoi Hijiri stepped forward with her hexagonal rod in hand.

She stood in front of Ikemaru and raised the rod with awfully slow movements.

She raised her head and looked to Taeko through the electric attack.

She gave a slight smile just as the lightning struck her.

A great roar burst out, but the result was not at all what Taeko had expected.

"!?"

The white light fired by the Dragon Emperor scattered in every direction like a shattered plate.

The explosion of light slammed noisily into the shops on either side of the road.

The shopping district shattered from the heat and impact.

After a series of explosions and a chorus of solid impacts, only Aoi remained standing.

She was unscathed.

"…It missed!?"

Aoi spoke without answering Taeko's question.

"Like that would work, you idiot. …If this is all you've got, I don't see how you can claim Nagoya won't surrender."

"…Damn ya."

"Don't panic. We'll take our time finishing you off. …Once you go down, Nagoya is ours."

Shoui ignored Aoi's mocking comment and looked behind the girl.

The man who had been standing there was gone.

—Shoui – Sight Tech – Take – Detect Enemy – Hit!

"Boss!"

He saw Ikemaru Takahiro walking up the sidewalk.

Several bicycles were lined up there.

As he walked along, he traced his bare hand along those bicycles.

“Peck at your prey, you birds.”

The group of bicycles flew up into the sky as if something had kicked at them.

It happened suddenly.

With a harmony of light metallic sounds, the bicycles flew along a gentle slope no matter which way they were pointed and no matter how they were oriented.

They filled the sky just like a flock of birds.

“!”

They then dropped down toward Shoui and Taeko.

“Dragon Emperor!”

Taeko raised her voice and a hemisphere of lightning was released from the exhaust port on the Dragon Emperor’s shoulder.

—Shoui – Dodge/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Leaping Dodge – Hit!

Just as he escaped the range of the lightning, the wheeled birds crashed down into the lightning light.

With a scorching smell, their metal and plastic melted and scattered.

“Th-that was close!”

“Just stay quiet and get outta the way! The next one’s comin’!”

He looked up to see Aoi raising her hexagonal rod.

Those two had incredible coordination, so they did not give Shoui and Taeko a chance to act.

There was a distance of over ten steps between Aoi and Taeko, so this attack would presumably fill that gap.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Auto-Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit!

For some reason, Shoui recognized the aura emitted by that pose.

"But I've never met her before."

Confused, he raised his defenses and glanced behind him.

Takada was no longer holding Taromaru in her arms.

The light brown Dog God had grown to the size of a large dog and now stood on the ground.

Takada said nothing as she embraced his neck and desperately tried to hold him back. Without that, he almost certainly would have rushed in to join the battle.

The slightest opening could settle everything here, so who would her fear attack?

The question sent a shudder down his spine, but no one could answer it.

Meanwhile, Aoi made her move.

She attached Words to the hexagonal rod simply by swinging it down in front of her.

Ah.

“Kusanagi!?”

Shoui understood everything when he heard what Taeko said.

Two days before, that shockwave attack had stopped the confrontation between him and Saki in the schoolyard.

Aoi’s attack contained the same presence and killer intent as that.

If the equation was the same, the answer would also be the same.

She swung the rod down until it hit the ground and shattered the asphalt.

The shock broke the rod’s central bolt, but the Rhythm activated.

First, it created a wind.

“!?” The air shook and a shimmering of heat pierced through Taeko and Shoui.

“It can’t be…!”

Before Taeko could take evasive action, the air cutting across the road exploded.

A powerful tearing raced by.

The chorus of tearing sounds sounded like an echo.

The tearing wind and shockwave slammed into the ground and scattered.

—Taeko – Savate/Gym/Steel/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Great Dodge – …Hit!

Taeko avoided the power rushing toward her.

Shoui tried to do the same, but something stopped him: a beast's roar.

Taromaru was unable to bear the killer intent of Kusanagi that Aoi was emitting.

"…!"

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Detect Killer Intent – Hit.

The killer intent growing behind him grew all the larger in response to the attack approaching from the front.

He heard Takada's voiceless scream within the din, so he did not dodge.

The Dis-Worder released the most powerful Rhythm he could use: the Break High.

—Shoui – Gym/Savate Tech – Multi-Take – Fix Stance – Hit!

He filled his entire body with strength and held his fist forward.

He did not know if he could break Kusanagi, but if he failed, Takada's fear would explode.

"Shoui!?" shouted Taeko.

But it was too late.

—Shoui – Break High/Boxing/Dodge Tech – Multi-Take – Intercept – Hit!

His aim was true and his fist contacted the great power.

A moment later…

“What are you doing!?”

A deep voice gave a shout and the power of Kusanagi vanished before Shoui’s eyes.

Part 4

2:51 PM

There was nothing there.

“!?”

Shoui looked forward as his Break High fist thrust out into empty air.

“…It vanished?”

His vision tried to answer his question.

The boy named Ikemaru stood in the distance.

The girl named Aoi stood in front of him with her hexagonal rod still held against the ground.

At the midpoint between Aoi and Shoui, Taeko had fallen onto her butt and was looking toward Shoui.

The ground had been torn up almost all the way to him.

However, someone stood right in front of him.

A short man dressed like a Buddhist monk faced away from him.

The air around the man was still vibrating, but Kusanagi’s power was gone.

The mass of power that had raced along the street while destroying it had utterly vanished in front of Shoui, just like when Aoi had deflected Taeko's electric attack.

The Fourth Alarm was still sounding and had begun to rule the surrounding atmosphere.

Shoui gasped for breath and heard the man in front of him speaking.

"Enough meaningless fighting. I managed to deflect Kusanagi, but what would have happened if I had not been here?"

"Iba…"

The man took a step toward Aoi's quiet voice.

Then he looked around the area and looked Shoui straight in the eye.

"That was a reckless decision," he said. "But it was also a brave one."

Shoui could not reply.

He did not know what had happened, so his body still contained extreme tension.

But the man paid him no more heed and looked to Aoi and Ikemaru instead.

"A moment ago, Nagoya's Student Council announced their unconditional surrender to Tokyo."

"!?"

"Nagoya Chancellor. No matter what you might say, Nagoya now belongs to Tokyo."

“Don’t be ridiculous! Got any proof of that!?”

“If you do not believe me, would you prefer to keep fighting?”

When Aoi heard the man’s arrogant words, she quickly raised her hexagonal rod again.

Taeko clicked her tongue and looked to Shoui.

“I can’t believe this.”

She looked behind him, so he looked back as well.

“?”

The great beast the Dog God had become was no longer there.

He only saw Takada sitting on the road and crying with Taromaru on her shoulder.

Her cries filled his ears more than the siren of the Fourth Alarm.

“I can’t believe this,” said Shoui as well.

At the same time, he heard a metallic sound.

He turned toward it and saw Taeko standing up and wiping the dust from her coat.

“Boss?”

“After talkin’ with Saki Seiji earlier, I had a feelin’ this would happen.”

She shrugged and looked to the Buddhist monk.

“Are ya sayin’ this is the only way for Nagoya to survive?”

“At the very least, your hometown has decided so.”

“Then it can’t be helped.”

She sighed and walked over to Shoui. Aoi kept her weapon at the ready, but…

“I won’t do anythin’,” said Taeko as she came to a stop in front of Shoui.

Her expression contained both exasperation and exhaustion.

“I can’t believe this, Shoui. …Are ya tremblin’?”

“Y-yes. I did try to do something pretty reckless.”

“Hm. That’s convenient.”

“Eh? Wh-what’s convenient?”

“Well, I ended up sidin’ with Osaka because ya were here.”

“Is that so?”

“And now Nagoya has gone over to Tokyo’s side.”

“Yes, so it seems.”

“That gives me contradictory feelings. Do I keep havin’ fun with ya or do I protect Nagoya?”

“Yes, I understand how you must feel.”

“Sorry.”

“Eh?”

—Taeko – Boxing/Steel Tech – Multi-Take – Strike – Hit!

Without giving him a chance to dodge, the Dragon Emperor's fist punched Shoui.

Even through his bandanna, a hit to the back of the head was effective.

"Okay. I'll be joinin' you along with this guy."

The Dog God expressed Shoui's thoughts in response to Taeko's selfish words.

"I'm passing out again?"

That was exactly what happened.

But in so doing, Nagoya had fully surrendered to Tokyo.

The power balance of Japan's students was greatly changing.

Chapter 11: Beginning of the End (After-Sales Service)

Part 1

4:15 PM

The Osaka Hilton hotel's sky lounge gave a view of the city of Osaka.

Two people viewed the colors of that city: Hisahide and Takada.

Hisahide stared at the silhouette of Osaka Castle visible in the distance.

"Sorry the day you arrived is already the big day of Ixolde's activation, Takada."

"I don't mind. I never was interested in Rhythms."

The Dog God on her shoulder spoke for her as she sipped at a teacup.

Hisahide faced her from across the table, seemed to have something he wanted to say, and sighed.

"You really stick to your own pace, you know that?"

"I am simply playing the role that was given to me. Right?"

The question was directed to Taromaru who replied in a quiet, bell cricket-like voice.

“A Dog God lives by devouring people’s indecision, hm? That creature was made from a portion of your Lives, right? Has he ever gotten along with anyone else?”

“Yes. Just today, he ran up onto someone else’s shoulder for the first time.”

“…Eh?”

“You’re the one that asked. Why do you sound so surprised?”

“Oh, well, y’know?” He scratched at his hair. “There’s really someone else like you in this city?”

“Yes. He is trying to play his role…and he’s far more indecisive than you or me.”

“Was he good person?” he asked while sipping at his tea.

“Yes. Although he did stare at my butt.”

Hisahide immediately spat out his mouthful of tea.

“H-he what!?”

“Hisahide-san, please don’t spit out your tea. You scared Taromaru.”

“Y-yeah, but more importantly…”

“I’ve said I can read other people’s Lives, haven’t I? Well, I could read his even more once Taromaru possessed him.”

“He still has some guts to admire your ass without permission.”

“You used to always look at my chest, though.”

“That’s because a girl’s all about the breasts, not the ass.”

“If you say so.”

That was all Takada said before taking another sip of her tea.

The waiter brought over a new pot of tea and a cake, so she pulled out her fork while speaking again.

“But he was an interesting person.”

“By looking at your ass?”

“In many ways, including that. He was indecisive about so many things yet he was still trying to do something about it on his own. I was jealous of that.”

“If you ask me, someone who can’t make up their mind is just weak.”

“Then I guess I’m fundamentally weak too.”

“Would it be conceited of me to say that’s why I’ll always protect you?”

“No, you’re working quite hard there, even if it isn’t as much as between Takahiro and Hijiri.”

“I’m glad to hear it. …But I’d like to meet this guy you’ve taken such an interest in.”

“You can if you want. He’s the one the Nagoya Chancellor brought with her.” She took a breath. “He is a key person. I could tell after prophesying his future.”

“His future?”

“Yes, I read his kotodama, but… What’s the matter?”

Hisahide brought a hand to his forehead.

“Ahh… I do want to go out with you, you know?”

“Yes, and I said that was fine.”

Takada held out her right hand to show the golden ring on the middle finger.

Hisahide looked to the silver ring on his own right hand’s middle finger.

“You weren’t thinking at all, were you?”

He sighed when she and Taromarou on her shoulder both tilted their head.

“Well, I guess this is destiny too,” he muttered before telling Takada to recite the prophecy she had seen.

She briefly hesitated and looked to Taromaru.

Taromaru erased all intonation from his voice and seemed to squeeze out the voice so only Nakamura could hear.

A white flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in the fire

A memory of death floats in nothingness

A king saves him

A queen laments him

A sage resigns himself

Fall into indecisiveness while looking to another's path

Choose your own path and hesitate

The true path lies in the past

His expression changed upon hearing it.

He looked Takada in the eye and voiced his own prophecy.

A red flower blooms in the darkness

An empty party begins in strength

A human heart flows into nothingness

A soldier saves the king

A woman becomes the queen

A sage reminisces

Run without looking to another's path

Choose your own path and sprint

The true path lies in the future

His lips then uttered something else.

"That prophecy is the flipside of mine."

"If so, he is the soldier who will save you and make you the king."

"You're one scary girl. Are you planning to drag him onto our side?"

“No. He is a key person because he is indecisive.”

“…?”

“He does not have his own rails…his own Words. Whether he saves you or not will likely be highly dependent on what happens now and on his own indecision.”

“So he’s just wishy-washy? He can’t take a stand about his own destiny?”

“No, that isn’t it.”

“Then…”

“He is hesitant because the possibilities presenting themselves to him are so great.”

“…”

She smiled at his silence.

“I understand because I was once crippled by indecision and closed off the possibility of becoming a Tuner, Buster, or Rhythm user.”

“Takada.”

“Yes?”

“Between me and him, which one’s the better guy?”

She answered with a slight smile.

“I think the one that can draw out his possibilities to their fullest is the better guy.”

“I see.” Hisahide checked his watch. “Okay, I guess it’s about time to head out.”

“Are you really forgoing the original plan and descending to the sewers from this hotel’s basement?”

“Yeah, it’s looking that way. Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers seem to have caught wind of Ikemaru and Aoi’s battle with the Nagoya Chancellor, so they’ve already set up some guards.”

“That makes things difficult. …So are you finally taking action to become king?”

Nakamura nodded and smiled at Takada.

“Well, I’ll be king by the time I reach Nagoya.”

Part 2

4:51 PM

Ixolde’s underground control room was preparing for Ixolde’s activation in two hours’ time.

The elites of Osaka’s Science Club Alliance were speaking only the necessary words and moving between the electronic equipment lined up in the control room. Their mechanical actions created the illusion that they were nothing more than a portion of the overall machine known as Ixolde.

It was a powerful illusion.

Two people in the control room’s entrance viewed it from close up.

One, an eyepatched boy, faced forward as he spoke.

“Compared to the emptiness of the celebration outside, this room is filled with quiet energy.”

The tall boy standing next to him nodded.

“I really don’t fit in with the Student Council and those VIPs. I was right to leave partway through.”

“You’ve never fit in anywhere.”

They both laughed bitterly at that and Souichirou said more with that atmosphere intact.

“It seems Nagoya…didn’t work out.”

“That Fourth Alarm, right? I’d placed some guards around the Hilton earlier just in case, so we have confirmed Nakamura Hisahide, Ikemaru Takahiro, and Aoi Hijiri are there. But there’s something odd about this.”

“?”

“One of the guests there is a girl named Takada…Kiyogi? Not sure how to read her name. And…word of this just reached me.”

Saki pulled out his attaché case and pulled the memo pad from inside it.

He opened it and read through it in a businesslike manner.

“According to the scout unit, the Nagoya Chancellor and the Tokyoites entered the Hilton together at 16:23, but they had a little something extra.”

“Extra?”

Saki scratched his head at Souichirou’s question.

“Hizaka Shoui. He was apparently unconscious and being carried, so I bet he was caught in the middle of something. What should we do? We could always break in on the pretext of saving Hizaka.”

“I leave that decision in your hands. For today, I’m only thinking about my personal actions.”

Souichirou continued facing the working students and never once turned toward Saki.

“But…the Shinkage Style is here, is it?”

“What? I’d heard the Modified Purple Electricity Style passed down by your family includes the Kage Style, so is there a connection there?”

“Yes. …This means a bond from before my birth has returned to Osaka. I will tell you the details eventually.”

He still did not face Saki.

“Well, even if the Shinkage Style is here, at least there won’t be an ogre this time,” said Saki.

Souichirou moved slightly.

He nodded.

“That celebration up above is such an empty farce. They will be pressing Ixolde’s remote activation button, but how many of them know that button is a dummy?”

“I wonder what moron’s gonna press that button without knowing a thing.”

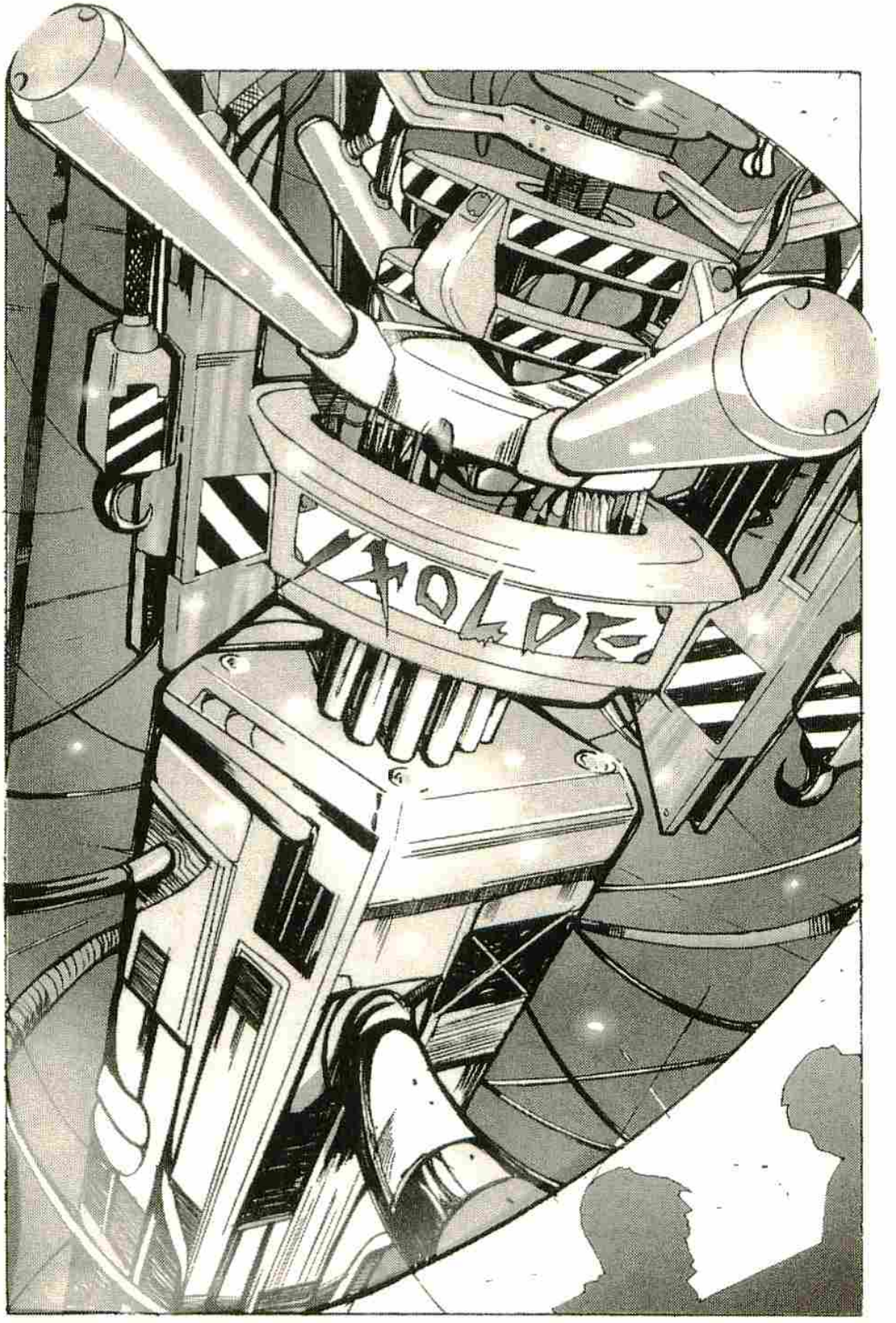
“I have no interest, but I’m sure Iwai Sanzou would know.”

“If they actually thought about it, they’d be able to figure it out. Live acceleration requires both timing and personnel, so they’d never give it a remote control like that.”

“The gathered sound will be sealed in the MD located inside the unmanned refinery at the central pocket in the deepest part of Ixolde. Only after eliminating as much as possible will it be automatically placed in storage.”

Souichirou repeated the same words he had heard in the underground operating room the day before.

Saki rested his head in his hand.



“The storage room is in the center of Ixolde. You can’t get there without going through the emergency passageway in front of the operating room unless you dug a new hole in the schoolyard. And where else could they hope to steal that strongest Rhythm from?”

“The only other option is the central pocket three hundred meters below ground.”

Saki sighed at Souichirou’s words and looked to the Babel Gun visible from the control room’s window.

“Ixolde’s a tricky thing.”

“From Tokyo’s perspective, the only damage will be to Kansai if they can steal the strongest Rhythm and return triumphant to Nagoya.”

“And if they defeat you, Kansai will lose its cornerstone.”

Souichirou finally turned to face Saki.

“Sorry. I’m going to graduate soon, and I had hoped to end my term uneventfully.”

“Don’t be like that. I’ll follow you for life.”

A quiet laugh rang emptily in the air.

“This is probably our last festival before graduation.”

“I need to make sure I am not burned,” said Souichirou quietly. “I do not want to be the festival bonfire.”

With that, he turned around to face the automatic door out of the control room.

“I’ll be waiting in the lobby, Seiji.”

“Huh? You aren’t going to watch the gathering of the sound?”

“This will soon be a holy ground meant only for those who have put in so much work here.”

“I see.”

Saki nodded and sighed.

The two boys left everything to those who belonged there and exited the room to prepare for battle.

Part 3

5:43 PM

Osaka was bright and busy on the surface, but there were a few differences below the surface.

First, it was pitch black as no light could get in.

Second, water calmly flowed through the sewers.

Those two things were always true below Osaka’s surface, but at the moment, something much like the surface was running through below the surface: noise.

“What’s with this salty-smellin’ sewage!? It’s up to my ankles.”

“They sent out some guards, so we had no other choice. Besides, my shoes are just as soaked!”

“Yer shoes don’t cost nearly as much as mine, ya moron!”

“Ah? Cost? How much could they possibly cost!?”

“79.8 thousand yen.”

“…Okay, I can see why you’re mad.”

“See?” Taeko sighed in the darkness. “But are ya sure yer ready? I know that glasses guy was real busy, but still.”

“Yes, Ikemaru was teaching me how to use his charms and the Discord Bombs.”

“Are you really gettin’ in to Ixolde from below ground?”

“According to the map Ikemaru had, I need to break down the wall two hundred meters ahead.”

“And meanwhile, I create a diversion on the surface? Ya sure ya trust me enough for that? I might betray ya for Osaka.”

“I don’t mind if you do. Once I have the Flame High, no one stands a chance against me. Not Nagoya and not Osaka.”

And…

“Hey,” said Taeko. “What’s yer connection with that guy from the Mountain who knew a lot about this sewer’s structure?”

“…”

“Ya don’t have to answer if ya don’t want to.”

“Iba was my sister’s boyfriend’s friend.”

“…That’s complicated.”

“Yeah. My sister and her boyfriend died after they were betrayed by their teacher, but Iba survived.” Hisahide’s voice rang in the darkness. “I think Iba might have had feelings for my-…”

He trailed off and his footsteps came to a stop.

“What is it?”

“Look up ahead.”

His voice and focus were directed toward the shadows of some metal bars in the darkness.

They were arranged like a window lattice and they ran from the ceiling to the floor to block the two students’ way.

“According to Iba, these have a high-voltage current running through them. Removing them will sound the alarm…but your Eighth Dragon Emperor should be able to neutralize that with its lightning attack. Try ignoring the current and bending one of the bars.”

“…You make it sound easy.”

The Dragon Emperor could be heard powering up.

“Dragon Emperor, release protection on the Third Activation.”

Before she had even finished speaking, the armor panel on the Dragon Emperor’s shoulder opened slightly and expelled white smoke and light.

The sewer grew bright and their silhouettes covered the wall as shadows.

A low, heavy noise slowly but surely sounded from the Dragon Emperor with a pulse-like Tempo.

"…!"

That was the roar of the Lightning High. It was the sound preferred by the lightning dragon.

The sewer wall trembled and the roar of thunder raced along below Osaka's surface.

Hisahide spoke even as his voice was drowned out.

"I'd heard the Dragon Emperor is a false arm that only activates once a dragon eye has been placed inside it."

"That's right. The dragon's armor is emperor-class and there are eight right and left pairs. Each of them has the power of a dragon inside."

"Is it alive?"

"Want to test it out? Not even I have taken it to the final activation needed to wake it up."

"Please don't. …There's no point in destroying half the city here, and that's what I've heard the other Dragon Emperors did."

"True enough."

Taeko grabbed the metal bars with the Dragon Emperor's fist and white smoke rose from between the metal claws and metal bars.

"Hold on. Are you sure you're okay there?"

"It's just the rubber on the palm melting. …There."

—Taeko – Boxing Tech – Take – Brute Force – Hit.

The metal bars bent quite a bit, creating a low sound like a root being pulled from the dirt.

A moment later, the bars and their frame came out as the Dragon Emperor's fist held them.

In the pale light of the Dragon Emperor, Taeko looked back and forth between its shoulder and the bars.

"Did ya say removin' it would sound the alarm?"

"You idiot!? Wh-what did you do!?"

"Well, I broke it…and it broke."

"You've ruined all the worked we've been doing here!"

"I didn't mean to, though. Ha ha ha."

"This is no laughing matter!"

"Calm down, calm down. Don't panic. I've just gotta create a diversion on the surface while ya head straight there, right?"

Taeko held the metal bars out toward Hisahide.

"So what should I do with these?"

He did not hesitate to answer.

"Throw them away, idiot!"

Part 4

5:58 PM

The first thing Shoui saw when he opened his eyes was a brown shadow.

His eyes focused on that brown color instead of the dimly-lit space around him.

Finally, he could tell what it was: a Dog God.

The small, foxlike animal was resting on Shoui's chest as he lay on his back.

He was also staring curiously at the boy's face.

"You don't need to worry."

The words came from the Dog God's mouth rather than his own.

He placed a hand on his throat and felt the bandages there.

He still could not speak.

"I can't believe this."

After having the Dog God say that, he looked in a different direction.

His focus shifted and the ceiling came into view.

It was an expensive-looking ceiling with a pattern drawn in warm colors.

It was both high and large.

"Is this a mansion or something?"

"No, it's a hotel."

He turned toward that male voice.

He removed the blanket placed over his chest and the Dog God quickly hopped over to his shoulder.

Shoui looked to the speaker while feeling the Dog God's claws through his thin innerwear.

A Buddhist monk sat cross-legged on the twin bed next to the one Shoui was lying on.

Shoui recognized the monk outfit as the kind worn at the Mountain.

The man wearing it had folded up the bed's blanket and sat on the flat sheet.

A tray on the sheet held a glass and a rectangular bottle of whisky.

The glass only contained some damp ice, so he had apparently already drank the contents.

But Shoui looked to the man without paying that any heed.

The short man had not sunk into the bed at all, so he was lighter than he seemed.

"Who are-…?"

"Wait."

When Shoui started to get up, the man held out a hand and gestured to the boy's feet with his chin.

"?"

Shoui looked down and found Takada lying on the bed.

She had removed her stole, the blanket by his feet was placed over her, and her eyes were closed.

He saw a ring on the hand gripping the top of the blanket.

It was an unadorned golden ring.

He tilted his head at the glittering ring of unknown origin, but then he noticed some small movement.

It was Takada's Dog God.

The creature ran up onto her back and hesitantly looked between Shoui and the man's gazes.

The one on Shoui's shoulder replied with a quiet voice reminiscent of a creaking door.

"It seems Takada and the Dog God have taken a liking to you," said the man.

"Is that so?"

"To be honest, this is a problem."

"Is she your daughter?"

"Of course not."

"Then why?"

"That Takada girl is destined to become the queen."

Shoui stared at the monk when he heard that.

His mouth remained closed, but…

“Talk about sticking with the classics. Don’t tell me you’re seriou-… Don’t say it! Not now!”

“I do not mind.”

“Oh, that’s luck-… Stop that!”

“I see the Dog God is reading all of your thoughts.”

“Yeah, and it’s not exactly fun. Can’t you stop it?”

“This is the first time the Dog God has naturally taken a liking to anyone other than Takada, so there is nothing I could do.”

“Is that so?”

Shoui shrugged and lay down on his side.

He made sure not to wake Takada as he adjusted his position and sighed while propping his head up with his hand.

“So what’s going to happen to me here?”

“It seems Nakamura can become the king with you here.”

“Nakamura…”

“If what he said is true, then he is the one that kicked you in Osaka Prefectural #2’s student dorm.”

“Oh, the guy who crushed my throat.”

The man frowned a little at that.

“…Your throat?”

“Yeah, he kicked it. Got a nice solid blow from directly below.”

“It’s unusual for Nakamura to miss.”

“Miss? …Where was he trying to hit me?”

“When going for the face, he was trained to hit the side of the head here or the jaw.”

“If I took that kick to the jaw, I think I’d have lost about five teeth.”

“It was an additional attack meant to keep you from speaking, so the end result was little different. Still, allow me to apologize in place of my student.”

The man obediently bowed.

Shoui was impressed that the man still did not sink into the bed even when he moved.

“Who are you?”

“Yuuki Senga hasn’t told you? I used to train under her.”

“Oh, so I was kind of following in your footsteps. Sorry. …It’s only been three days since I came down from the Mountain, so I still haven’t been by Nandaimon.”

“But I had heard the boy named Hizaka Shoui was Nandaimon’s protégé.”

“That may have been true two years ago.” He laughed bitterly. “I trained at the Mountain for two years and still didn’t become a Chancellor. I haven’t figured out how to face her when I go back.”

“Two years? Has Yuuki Senga had anything to say about that?”

“Like I said, I haven’t seen her. She hasn’t come to say anything to me either, so I feel like I missed my timing.”

“I see. Then…”

The man crossed his arms for a few seconds.

“You may have been lucky to be so talentless.”

“What?”

“I assume you know Yuuki Senga used to be a head teacher at the Mountain.”

“Yes.”

“But I doubt you know that she traveled around Japan thirteen years ago, creating Chancellors as she did so. She created Chancellors who could use the Heavy Rhythms that have since become Death Techno.”

“Thirteen years ago?”

“Yes, the same year as the Kinki Riot that began as a sports riot after the Koshien game went into extra innings.”

The man pushed back his right sleeve to show off the arm.

The entire right arm was covered in keloids.

Shoui gasped and the man continued.

“As we fought each other, something seemed wrong. I began to worry over why we were fighting. And…”

“And?”

“After the third death, when the Heavy Rhythms began to be feared, I realized that we had been placed on the path to conflict.”

He covered his arm with the sleeve once more.

“Yuuki Senga tried to seal away the Heavy Rhythms that the world viewed as dangerous and she tried to suppress that age in which student conflicts were frequent. To do so, she taught the Chancellors supporting Japan how to use the Heavy Rhythms and had them fight.”

“You’re lying.”

“I am not.”

“Do you have any proof?”

“…”

Shoui laughed quietly at the man’s silence.

“Not even Old Lady Senga could manipulate people’s hearts to that extent. Besides, the sports riot that began the Kinki Riot wasn’t faked. It was a natural incident caused by the cheering squad. She couldn’t have interfered in that.”

“Then why did I alone survive?” asked the man. “We realized our mistake and wished to settle our differences, but our surroundings did not allow it. Most notably, the Mountain. …The Tokyo Chancellor and Osaka Chancellor were driven to death by the Mountain and the corporations.”

“But…”

“They were pursued by the private army of the corporations that feared the Heavy Rhythms…and they were surrounded by the special forces of the Mountain led by Yuuki Senga.”

“…”

“That was when my Words changed.”

The man breathed a deep and heavy sigh.

At the same time, he sank cross-legged into the bed.

His head was still hanging.

“Dis-Worder, it was only Chancellors with special abilities like yours that Yuuki Senga taught to use the Heavy Rhythms.”

“Eh?” asked Shoui.

He recalled what Saki had said on the roof the other night.

“There was once a boy who had no Words. He brought misfortune to Osaka and died…”

“You heard that from the 1st Special Duty Officer of Osaka’s Chancellor’s Officers, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” confirmed Shoui. “The 1st Special Duty Officer at the time was his friend. And his Words…”

He looked to the monk, but the man did not raise his head.

His shoulders shook a little but there was a small smile on his downturned face.

He was laughing.

“Yes, this hand is all that remains. …This hand that, at the end of it all, could not defend against Yuuki Senga’s spear and allowed those two to kill each other!”

Shoui was left speechless.

“Do not worry. You were kicked out of the Mountain, so they must have decided you cannot use a Heavy Rhythm. Even if it took them two years to do so.”

“Why would they want to have me use a Heavy Rhythm?”

“Because of what I said.”

“…?”

The Dog God on Shoui’s shoulder expressed his confusion by tilting its head.

The monk raised his head with a powerful smile on his face.

—Shoui – Mind Tech – Take – Decode Expression – Miss!

The expression was too powerful to read.

A chill ran down his spine and the Dog God hid behind his head.

“I said I would create someone who could use a Heavy Rhythm, so Yuuki Senga attempted to create someone to oppose them.”

“What?”

“You still do not understand? Think carefully. It is not just you. Her granddaughter is the same.” The man took a breath. “Remember this, boy. While Yuuki Senga erased all kings and split Japan between east and west, I intend to create a king and reunite Japan once more. …She does not like it, though.”

“Doesn’t like it? …And that’s why she made Yuuki like that?”

“Yes, the Killing Holder. …She mentally trained up her own granddaughter after the girl killed someone. I assume she did so once she realized she could not rely on you.”

“…”

Shoui silently removed his head from his hand and lay down on the bed.

“Ahh, ahh,” he sighed. “So it’s all my fault.”

“I don’t think it is,” said Takada’s voice without warning.

Shoui froze in place on the bed.

“Don’t be so mean, Iba-sensei,” said her voice. “I’ve been listening, and you make it sound like Shoui-san caused all this.”

“No, I was saying Yuuki Senga had-…”

“Shoui-san trusts this Yuuki person.”

The man named Iba fell silent at that.

Shoui realized the weight of Takada’s arms had left his legs, so he got up.

"…"

He saw her smiling.

It felt like the room's dim light was illuminating only that smile.

He scratched at and tilted his head.

"I feel like these past few days have been the busiest in my life. Everyone who shows up says whatever they want and I'm faced with these huge revelations on a daily basis."

"You are probably working through two years' worth of truths and obligations," said the Dog God on Takada's shoulder.

Shoui nodded and the man to his right cleared his throat.

"Takada, I need to get going soon."

"Oh, you're causing a diversion in the city, right? From underground."

"I really should have gone with the other two…but I wanted to speak with Yuuki Senga's current student."

Shoui tilted his head at that.

"Um, what are you two talking about?"

"We're stealing the strongest Rhythm from Ixolde."

Takada sounded entirely casual as she clasped her hands and stretched a little.

Shoui's head dropped forward.

“What?”

“You understand the situation, don’t you? We’re from Tokyo’s Chancellor’s Officers. Since Osaka creating the strongest Rhythm would be a threat, we’re going to steal it.”

“Um… This is kind of sudden.”

“Don’t worry. We aren’t making the attack. We’re only creating a diversion.”

“Attack? Diversion? I’m hearing a lot here that makes me worry.”

“You don’t have to worry because you have time to figure it all out. …The diversion team doesn’t have to start moving until the attack team has made their attack and escaped. We still have plenty of time.”

Takada smiled.

“Please understand your position here. If you do, nothing like the Kinki Riot will happen. That misfortune only occurred because there was no one to worry about who they were.”

Final Chapter: The Battle Does Not End (Next Volume Preview)

Part 1

6:03 PM

A single light was visible after night fell on the Nandaimon Shrine.

The door to the sanctuary was open and a single girl cast a shadow in that light while crouched down.

It was Yuuki Yuuki in her red blazer modeled after the Suzaku.

She had her back to the light coming from the open sanctuary and her eyes were staring into the night.

She had no expression on her face as she simply sat there.

Her unmoving gaze was directed toward the Ikoma Mountains west of the Koto region.

Time passed.

As it did, the surrounding darkness grew deeper and the air grew colder.

Small, white breaths escaped her lips.

A dog howled somewhere in the distance.

It sounded fearful.

It was pleading for its owner.

When she heard it, a small change came over her expression.

She wrinkled her brow ever so slightly.

But…

“Sorry about the wait, Yuuki.”

After that sudden voice, a giant red and white staff was thrust in front of her eyes.

She turned around to find Senga in the sanctuary’s entrance.

The woman held Housei out in one hand.

“I wasn’t too sure about swapping out the parts, but I think it came out well. As you asked, the contents are focused more on the Aqua High than the Cold High.”

“Thank you.”

Yuuki stood up, looked down at short Senga, and gave a quick bow.

“Thank you, grandmother.”

Senga smiled bitterly at her granddaughter’s thanks.

“You really haven’t changed, Yuuki.”

“Isn’t it normal to thank people?”

“Not your family. You didn’t two years ago.”

Yuuki said nothing in response and took Housei from the woman. She used a single hand to swing around the staff that resembled a tuning fork shaped like a long triangle.

Senga watched the giant staff slicing through the air.

“Your father and I couldn’t use Housei that well when we were eighteen.”

“This much is to be expected of a girl who can kill.”

Yuuki stopped Housei in front of her eyes.

“It feels light when holding it, but it feels heavy when stopping it.”

“The gaps are filled with floating emblem panels sold by Izumo Aviation and Virtual Industries. It has a lot of heavy components in order to increase its power, after all. …That means it isn’t very heavy, but it has more mass than before. Be careful.”

“I don’t mind. More mass should make it more satisfying when I hit someone with it.”

“Hit someone? There’s someone who can get that close to you?”

“Nagoya Chancellor Yamashita Taeko.”

Yuuki spoke the name quietly and nodded while looking to Housei in her hand.

“Now that Nagoya has joined Tokyo, I have no reason to avoid fighting the girl whose brother I killed.”

“That Nagoya Chancellor hasn’t left her hotel. …Are you going to attack her yourself?”

“I don’t need to. Everything is going to gather around Ixolde.”

“Then you need to hurry. Ixolde will be activated in another hour.”

Yuuki looked to the western mountains again.

Wrapped in the colors of the night, the boundary between mountain and sky was growing blurry.

“Hey, grandmother.”

“Hm?”

“You tried to do a few things thirteen years ago, and failed, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s fine. I know you sometimes have nightmares…and that you call the names Kuki Udai, Nakamura Midori, and Iba Masaaki when you do.”

“I do not recall raising the kind of granddaughter that spies on people as they sleep.”

Yuuki ignored Senga’s bitter smile and asked another question.

“Is this the same?”

“Is what?”

“Are Hizaka Shoui’s apparent lack of Words and my current state leading us in the same direction as thirteen years ago, as the rumors say?”

“Are you asking if I’m going to have the students kill each other like during the Kinki Riot in order to adjust everything to my liking?”

Yuuki did not nod at that and more of Senga's words reached her back.

"You are who you are because of your own decisions. And Shoui didn't have any Words when he was found, right? He had already lost his Words as he trembled in the burned-out ruins of that building, right?"

"Words…hm?"

Yuuki gave a powerful swing of Housei.

The joint between the rod and power device bent, and the staff transformed into something like a giant wing.

With a metallic sound, the transformation was complete.

She held the device in its portable form and looked to Senga.

"Grandmother, does it look to you like Hizaka Shoui has no Words?"

"Hm? Has he ever recited any Words?"

"When you traveled around the country thirteen years ago, you said there is a mystery concerning Words and Rhythms, didn't you?"

"…"

"The former Osaka Chancellor used a Rhythm without using a Rhythm. …Weren't you investigating that sort of mystery concerning the relationship between Words and Rhythms? Wasn't that the point of the Kinki Riot?"

Senga sighed as if to deflect Yuuki's tone.

“Hah. I’m surprised you still remember that.”

“How could I forget when that mystery was solved two years ago? …What are Rhythms and Words? Where do they come from and why? All of those mysteries were solved.”

“And that’s why you became the Killing Holder, right?”

Yuuki did not answer that question.

She looked away from Senga and began walking.

She left the shrine and started toward the city.

She was on her way to Osaka.

But she did say one final thing.

“Either way, all I can do is wait.”

Afterword

“Hey, bro! I’ve got some good stuff from Taiwan for just 58 yen a bag!”

Have you ever gotten a dangerous-sounding wrong number like that?

I have.

And that’s why (okay, that’s not *actually* why) I had to move.

Also, I’ve started using the internet. (I feel like a ramen shop saying “We’ve started serving chilled noodles”.)

It makes for a decent environment.

However…

The phone line isn’t up yet.

Nor is the fax line.

I’m really not sure if my lifestyle has moved forward or back here.

Anyway, this was another long book and I was in a traffic accident, so my life’s been pretty exciting.

After all, I was driving safely along when a dump truck slammed into me from behind and my car was squished in like a Choro-Q.

The car was of course totaled.

As I stared at it while saying goodbye at the car dealership, I had to wonder if it would pop a wheelie if you stuck a manhole cover in by the license plate.

That was quite the experience.

(I may be joking around, but it was pretty amazing. It's really wonderful that I wasn't hurt, though.)

Anyway, it's looking like the page number just keeps going up with each book I write. When Berlin through Hong Kong are lined up on the shelf at a bookstore, it's funny how clearly you can see that each one is longer than the last.

Let's all laugh together if Osaka's second book ends up being even longer.

Now that I've talked about some completely unrelated stuff, let's get to the traditional phone call.

This time it's a conversation over email.

"Hey, so what do you think of the story this time?"

"Eh? You're really asking me that without giving me the second half again? Die."

"I haven't written the second half yet, so could you find something to say at this point? In fact, just do it."

"Ehh? Seriously? But I don't want to say something stupid."

"The best thing to do is to honestly say what's in your heart. C'mon."

“Hmm. I like Yuuki more than Takada. I like girls that get mad at me.”

“I’m not interested in speaking with a masochist, so this line will shut down in five seconds.”

“Wait, you bastard! I was being serious!”

What an annoying guy.

Oh, but I’ve been busy since Osaka is being made into a video game too. The game takes place in Osaka two years after the novel. The main character is from Tokyo and he investigates Osaka’s past and the connections between people there. It doesn’t overlap much with the novel characters, but since it has the same setting, I hope you’ll play it if you’re the wonderful sort of person who would like to live in this kind of world.

I also created a tentative website for myself. I’ll be posting unpublished novels, illustrations, and materials on the City Series.

The address is http://www.din.or.jp/~arm/

And the address for the company I work at (this will be for information on the Osaka game and on my current situation) is http://www.tenky.co.jp/

Now, then. I just read through Part A while listening to Orbital’s The Girl with the Sun in Her Head. (It’s Western techno. I think this might be what a Rhythm sounds like.)

“Whose question is the strongest?”

Well, I guess that mystery will be solved next time.

September 1998. Early morning on a workday.

-Kawakami Minoru